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Thomas a Kempis and the  
Brothers of the common life





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*Super omnia & in omnibus, requiescat anima mea in Domino. Requies, quia ipse Sanctorum eterna requies. Lysle. 17. 17. 17.*



VERA EFFIGIES THOMÆ DE REMIS AD VIVUM.

*Paul natione Testonicus, ordinis Canonicorum regularium S. Augustini, montis S. Agnetis, prope Lugdunum, in Dacia Tract. Dux in singulare domine suavia, et cordis, huius a conversatione doctus, et beatae Mariae virginis conjugis amator. Intercessit, post 17 non parvula gratula ab a. Dni 1471, octavo Kalendas Augusti, clausit for. 52.*









# THOMAS À KEMPIS

AND THE

BROTHERS OF COMMON LIFE

BY THE

REV. S. KETTLEWELL



VOLUME I.

LONDON

KEGAN PAUL, TRENCH, & CO., 1 PATERNOSTER SQUARE

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## P R E F A C E.

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THE present work has been the labour of many years, with the exception of some long intervals needed for other matters. The character of it was such that it could not be hastily written, since much patient research and labour were required, careful thought, and, in no small degree, a thorough comprehension of the works of Thomas à Kempis.

In the Introductory Chapter the apology for writing these Memorials, the plan pursued, and the sources from whence the materials for the work have been taken, are set forth ; and it is only to notice a few other matters that this preface is needed. Two or three objects have been kept steadily in view. First, to collect and set in order the many varied and scattered particulars relative to the Life and Writings of Thomas à Kempis. It was peculiarly a hidden life, of which it was only possible to catch occasional glimpses, from what the old biographers said of him ; while there still remained much that could be learnt respecting him, though indirectly, through his own words : (1) in what he says of

others in whom he was interested, and with whom he was associated ; and (2) in the instructions on the spiritual life which he gave in various ways, from which we gather much information regarding his interior devotion, and his views on religion.

Another object kept in view was, to bring out more prominently the nature and results of the religious movement or Society of which he was the most conspicuous ornament and chief exponent ; and particularly to give some account of the lives and characters of some of its early members, men with whom for the most part à Kempis was acquainted, and who were largely instrumental in moulding the devout life of our author. In reproducing these Memoirs, or short Biographies, which à Kempis himself has given, I have kept as much as possible to the simple and pious language which the writer employs. And they have been placed in the earlier part of these Memorials, so as to make them synchronize with the period when à Kempis knew them, and was deeply impressed with the holiness of their lives. In the latter part of this work, sketches or brief notices of the lives of many other excellent characters are interspersed. The information is various, and has been drawn from some old Chronicles, though chiefly from two written by à Kempis, relating to what transpired during his lifetime ; and in the substance of what has been selected I have

endeavoured to avoid needless repetition, and still to preserve a continuous history of events.

A third object, moreover, arising from these two, has been to shew, that from what can be learnt of the life of à Kempis and his connection with the Brothers of Common Life, and from what can be gathered of the religious revival of those days in which he and others were concerned, and to which he contributed much by his devotional treatises, we have in a remarkable and manifold degree the very requirements needed for the production of that unique volume of spiritual counsel, the ‘*De Imitatione Christi*.’ There are many particulars of agreement, which upon close examination are so identical in spirit, though they may somewhat differ in expression, between what is said of and by à Kempis and the Brothers, and what is found in the above-named work, that when taken together they seem to confirm Thomas à Kempis as the real author of it, in a most unmistakable way. The religious sentiments of the first Brothers of Common Life, and passages from the various other writings of à Kempis, which have been introduced into this work, will throw much light upon this point, and shew how much the instruction, and mystical vein of religious thought peculiar to them, are to be found in the ‘*De Imitatione Christi*.’

The historical events of the period in which



à Kempis lived, moreover, deserve to be better known than they are. Partly, however, on account of the enormous enthusiasm consequent upon the rash but romantic adventures, and the disastrous results of the Crusades, which preceded this period, and partly on account of the momentous issues attending the Reformation which succeeded it, this intervening portion of history has to a great extent been lost sight of and overshadowed : and yet it is full of eventful interest, though too often of a tumultuous and cruel character. It was an 'age of the Church,' says an able writer in the 'Christian Remembrancer,' 'in which we seem to expect less tokens of her spiritual life than in any other . . . and yet precisely in this century it was, that a deep and pure devotion sprang up, surpassing all that had been known before in intensity, superior to all that was to come after in purity.' How deep, how earnest, how holy, how real this religious devotion was, the following pages will shew. Some allusion will be made to the various distressing events and bitter struggles which took place, and to the general character of these times ; so that the reader may have a better idea, by contrast, of the peaceful position occupied by à Kempis and the Brothers of Common Life on the whole, amid the heaving turbulence of the age, and enable him at the same time to gain a deeper insight into the

springs of that irresistible change in society which shortly afterwards followed in Europe.

These matters are, however, but cursorily touched upon, so that à Kempis, and the spiritual revival in which he was so largely concerned, may stand out in prominent light. He is the chief central figure, among many others; and this is the place in a peculiar sense assigned to him by posterity, since he has long been regarded as the chief exponent and representative of what is termed German Mysticism in its purest and most practical form. He is also the most celebrated and best known of the pious Brothers of Common Life, and was one who especially laboured to keep alive and perpetuate the flame of the 'New Devotion,' and by whom its fervour and sentiments were handed down to future generations.

I would here take the opportunity of thanking the Rev. S. J. Stone, the author of 'The Church's One Foundation,' and other hymns, for his kindness in translating several of the hymns or canticles of Thomas à Kempis. I have to thank also Miss Fry for some translations from the German. Nor must I forget to mention the welcome assistance afforded me when in Zwolle by Mr. Th. van Riemsdijk, who has since my visit been appointed Archivist of Arnheim. I must express my thanks also to Mr. van Doorninch, Archivist of the province of Over-

yssel, who kindly sent me, after my return home, the picture of à Kempis, where he is represented as seated in the grounds belonging to the Monastery of Mount St. Agnes ; and, among others, to Dr. Gross of Kempen for a photograph of the gymnasium at Kempen, and the information he has given me.

The work has been full of interest to me, and has very pleasantly and profitably, I trust, filled up many vacant hours, while disengaged from other duties : and I sincerely hope that not a few who read these pages may find a like profit and enjoyment in them, and that some may be led thereby to a higher realization of the Interior Life.

EASTBOURNE : 1882.



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# THOMAS À KEMPIS

WITH SOME ACCOUNT AS GIVEN BY HIM OF  
THE BROTHERS OF COMMON LIFE



## CHAPTER I.

### INTRODUCTORY.

Further information of Thomas à Kempis needed—The influence he has exercised on Christian life through the ‘*Imitatio*’—Was his life in accordance with it?—The character and earnestness of his religion imbued with Scripture and imprinted in the ‘*Imitatio*’—The earlier Biographers of à Kempis—A contemporary writer—Buschius—Tolensis—Much of the Spiritual history of à Kempis gathered from his Devotional Works—His Memoirs of the first Brothers of Common Life—His Chronicles of Mount St. Agnes—Three places with which à Kempis was connected—Particulars of him from other sources—The character of the times in which he lived—His manner of life in harmony with the ‘*Imitatio*’—It illustrates it—Yet to be viewed independently of it—Together they incite to a higher Christian life.

FIVE hundred years have now passed away since Thomas à Kempis was born, and it seems only natural and becoming that some attempt should be made to give a more enlarged account of him than has hitherto appeared. Several short sketches of his life, slightly varying and contained in a few pages, are to be found placed at the commencement of some of the editions of the ‘*Imitation of Christ*,’ and occasionally prefacing some of the other works of à Kempis; and a few reminiscences of him have been interwoven among other historical events and characters. A somewhat fuller account of him in English appeared more than a hundred and sixty years ago by an anonymous writer, which was recommended to the public in a dedicatory epistle by George Hickes, D.D.,<sup>1</sup> the Non-

<sup>1</sup> A copy of this may be seen in the British Museum, bound up with several other works of a religious character. It is also placed at the beginning of some devout writings of à Kempis other than those found in the *Imitation*.



juror divine ; but even this comes far short of what might be looked for. His life, indeed, has been in a certain sense shrouded from the public gaze, and little direct information is to be gained of him in comparison of what might be desired respecting such an excellent character, whose name is so familiar to many Christian ears, and dear as a household word among the many numerous families and Churches of Christendom. Still much may be learned about him by other means, as I purpose to show, which will reflect light upon his character and manner of life, and show to us more clearly what kind of man he was. And in an age like the present, so remarkable for research and eagerness after further light and information—when no little diligence is exercised in unfolding the history of the past, and setting before the world in a more impressive and intelligent manner the many important events that have happened, and the more celebrated characters that have exerted influence and power among their fellow men—it is much to be desired that some effort should be made to make our English-speaking race better acquainted than it is with what can be known of à Kempis ; nay, it would seem a reproof to our times were we content to suffer the account of the life of such an one to lie in greater obscurity than needs be. For in the roll of God's honoured saints there are not many whose names are more universally revered and beloved than that of Thomas à Kempis, notwithstanding no place has been found for him in the Romish calendar and but scant mention be made of him in some of the popular '*Lives of the Saints*.'<sup>1</sup>

The name of à Kempis is honoured and regarded with pious affection, not because much is known respecting the man personally by the world at large, or because people have been edified by instructive particulars of his life, but

<sup>1</sup> Butler, in his *Lives of the Saints*, only mentions à Kempis incidentally as it were, in a note, and as not worthy of a place among the pious celebrities that he enumerates. There is doubtless a reason for this. À Kempis was not in much favour among a certain class of Roman Catholics, though much beloved and honoured by others. I have searched in vain also for his name in Baring-Gould's work.

because so many in the past, as well as in the present, have felt the value of his holy counsels and have profited by them. Very many who know that excellent work of the 'De Imitatione Christi,' and esteem it highly, know little or nothing of the author. His life is with them a blank. Indeed, in most minds there hangs about his name a certain vague impression of his being a very holy man, too far advanced and exalted above the life of ordinary men, and unsuited as an example for those to follow who have to mix much with the world, and hence they can benefit little by it. A haze of sanctity as it were surrounds his character; an ideal veneration for him prevails, as for a most devout and secluded person who had separated himself entirely from the world and from all interest in his fellow men; as one who lived solely for God and the salvation of his own soul; and of whom not much can be known, and as little instruction or advantage derived from a further endeavour to gain a more enlarged and distinct view of his life and character.

Now, as all this has been taken for granted, mistakes have been made about him, and erroneous ideas have prevailed as to what he really was; and while only a few have gained but a slight, and often inadequate, if not imperfect, knowledge of him, which they have gleaned from the short sketches alluded to above, many are altogether ignorant of anything respecting him. A modern writer says, 'Not one reader in a thousand knows anything whatever of the history and character of Thomas à Kempis.'<sup>1</sup> And, owing to the controversy which arose some time ago as to whether he were the real author of the 'De Imitatione Christi' or not, and to some question which had been advanced as to whether one of those persons ever lived who had been put forward as the author, and, further, as to whether the book was not the product of several minds, a confused notion has prevailed with not a few as to whether he had any real existence, so that they have come

<sup>1</sup> See preface to *The Companions for the Devout Life*, St. James's Lectures. Murray.

to look upon Thomas à Kempis as an imaginary person. Hence there appears some need for the present work, in which an endeavour is made to gather together all the scattered materials that can be found respecting this honoured follower of Christ, who became through his works such a blessing to his own and future generations, and to weave them as far as possible into something like a full-length portrait of him, that he may stand out to our view not in a bare name, or as a mere myth, but as one who took an active and loving part in the relative duties of life in the sphere allotted to him, and that something more definite and complete may be learnt about him.

There are those in the Christian world—those at least who speak our English tongue—who want to know more concerning Thomas à Kempis, and who are curious enough and anxious to be better acquainted with his history; and though they may not obtain all that they would wish to know about him, yet it will be no little satisfaction to them to learn that there is much that is both interesting and highly instructive to relate concerning him, which is not generally known. Justice and gratitude, moreover, to the memory of one whose words have been so fruitful for good to innumerable souls seem to call for a fuller and clearer recognition of him and his works than what we possess in our language.

It is clear from what can be gathered that though à Kempis loved retirement he did not lead a hermit's life, or become an isolated being, and though intensely religious he did not live to himself alone. His life was intimately associated and mixed up with that of others around him, and it is by knowing something of them that we learn more of him. He shone not as a single star which attracts our attention by its striking lustre, but in company with others, for he was one of the members of a pious brotherhood, many of whom were remarkable for their singular devotion. And this is one reason why it is desirable to give some account of those whom he knew and



with whom he associated, since by this means his own life will be the better understood.

From an intimate knowledge and thorough consideration of a large mass of materials, I have little doubt but that the beauty, holiness, and loveliness of his character will come out to view in distinguishable outline, however much he himself wished to lie hidden, and will grow upon the reader as he proceeds; and that however shortcoming and imperfect the description of him may be, as from the necessity of the case it must be to some extent, there will be enough to show that he was pre-eminently a whole-hearted Christian—a diligent student and obedient hearer of the Holy Scriptures; one who loved his fellow men, but loved his Saviour above all things, and who followed Him with a faithfulness and fervency rarely witnessed. There may not be those exciting and stirring incidents, those ever-varied and changeful events, which are to be found in lives of more public men who appeared openly before the world and mixed in its ever-shifting scenes; nor may there be that freshness and brightness of colouring in the picture that may arise from a recent acquaintance with some one who has but lately passed away, where the writer has a vivid impression of the living person in his mind; but we shall find that the lighter shades and more subdued and softer tints of a hidden life have a peculiar beauty and value of their own, and are not to be despised; and that though far removed from our times, and living in a period little noticed, there is sufficient, in recounting the memorials of him and his Brethren, to awaken a lively interest, while at the same time it will serve to light up a dark page of history, and to show that amid the growing corruptions and fierce strife of the age preceding the Reformation there was a glorious witness borne to the truth and reality of Gospel light and life; that there was a remnant of God's people valiantly holding on their way, forming as it were a bright and luminous circle amidst surrounding darkness and deadness—like a little

Goshen of the Israelites in Egypt—rejoicing in the light, and zealously cleaving to Christ and serving Him.

There is much too in the inner life of such a man as à Kempis, as well as in the associations which surrounded him in the retired walk of life along which he passed, and in the fellowship and devotion of the friends whose love and society he enjoyed, which I purpose recounting, to afford the reader a sweet satisfaction and to incite him to renewed endeavours after a holy life. In short, the records of such a life, whatever difficulties lie in the way, which may to a certain extent have hitherto prevented the publication of such a work as this, are too valuable to be lost sight of, to lie hidden in old tomes and in other languages, or to remain scattered in fragmentary pieces, and well deserve to be carefully gathered up and set in order, while at the same time it must be acknowledged that he is not only worthy for whom this should be done, but that God is hereby to be glorified in all that concerns this humble-minded saint of His, and His people edified.

From a small endeavour in the first instance to satisfy a desire to know more of this devout follower of Christ, whose name was so often mentioned and associated with the '*De Imitatione Christi*,' but of whom few seemed to know anything, my interest in the work grew as time went on and the materials for it increased. An intense longing to know something more definite of the author of the above-named work, which had been a constant companion for many years, and to which the present writer has been much indebted, took possession of him, for he often wondered what kind of man he had been. Had he lived a life consistent with the pious instructions which he gave, and which took such lasting hold of men? Was he the saint-like character I had imagined him to be from the words of his which I had read? And if so, how had he attained to this state of grace and excellence? How had he been brought up in early years? What circumstances had there been favourable or unfavourable to his growth in the Divine life? What was his early dis-

position, or the natural bent of his mind? Were there any special providences that seemed to influence him and determine him to live an earnest Christian life? What sort of associates and friends had he as he grew up? Were there any wise and good and learned men to counsel and direct his steps and pursuits? What was his outward manner of life, and what the inner history of his soul?

I was anxious to obtain information on these points, and to know, further, whether his life as a monk was passed according to the popular notion of such a calling, or, as some have pictured the author of the '*De Imitatione Christi*,' living in ascetic self-righteousness, and reckoning not what became of a sinful world so long as he could but save himself; or was it otherwise spent, as became a follower of Him who came to minister to others? And if so, in what way did he exhibit the perfection of the Christian life, and how far and in what manner did his conduct illustrate and enforce his words? And having ascertained and examined the nature of the other works or writings which he is said to have composed, I was wishful to find out whether they would throw any further light upon his life and character. These were some of the questions I wished to solve. And though the work was frequently laid aside, the desire to obtain the required information would return again and again, so that I had little or no rest till the matter was taken up afresh; and since I felt I could not lay the work altogether on one side, I was nevertheless constantly refreshed by the further particulars that were added to my store and the satisfactory solution which attended these inquiries, which I purpose to present to the reader in due order.

It will be observed that I proceed on the assumption that Thomas à Kempis is the true author of the '*De Imitatione Christi*.' And I came to this conclusion not lightly or after a cursory view of the subject, but only after instituting a most searching inquiry into the matter, and carefully sifting the evidence in each particular respecting the several individuals for whom the claim of authorship was made.

The construction of this work was indeed for a long time laid on one side until this question could be thoroughly investigated ; for it seemed undesirable to proceed further with it until I was fully satisfied that Thomas à Kempis was in a fair and reasonable degree proved to be the author, since the fame of his name undoubtedly rested upon this fact.

At first I was somewhat staggered at what could be said in favour of the claims of two other persons more especially, viz. the Abbot Gessen or Gersen, of Verceil, and the Chancellor Gerson, of Paris ; and I confess to a feeling that weighed upon me for a time as to whether Thomas à Kempis had indeed composed this celebrated book. On looking more fully into the question, however, I found that while the claims of the other two rested upon very uncertain grounds, and evidence that could not be well sustained, there was abundance of overwhelming proof, and to my mind substantial and conclusive, in support of Thomas à Kempis. I need not here enter further upon this matter, as the result of this investigation has been set forth in another work to which I must refer the reader ;<sup>1</sup> but I would just add that after finding that the title of Thomas à Kempis could be so well established and proved in so many ways, while the claims of others were found to be faulty, I felt free to take up this work again, and prosecute it without any hesitation as to Thomas à Kempis being the undoubted author of the '*De Imitatione Christi*,' notwithstanding a few persons may still be found to favour the claims of others.

This book, which has reflected so much honour on the name of Thomas à Kempis, is in itself a wondrous production, as it has been elsewhere shown, especially considering the age in which it was written. It exercises a peculiar and powerful influence upon devout minds, which has doubtless been the cause of its marvellous and almost universal popularity ever since it appeared.<sup>2</sup> I do not,

<sup>1</sup> See *The Authorship of the 'De Imitatione Christi.'* Rivingtons: London.

<sup>2</sup> See appendix at the end of this chapter.



however, now purpose to inquire into its intrinsic merits, and what led to its singular fame and the just esteem in which it is held, further than allude to one point, to which I would in passing call attention, as it is here deserving of notice. There was, at the time when it first appeared, a wide-spread yearning to know more of Divine truth, and how men ought to live so as to please God, which this book supplied. This arose in a great measure from the discountenance given to the reading of the Bible by the laity ; a covering had, as it were, been thrown over the lamp of life and the full diffusion of its rays discouraged, for men were taught by those then in authority in the Church to regard it as a thing forbidden, or at least fraught with danger to the soul.<sup>1</sup> This, whilst it shut out the light from many souls, made others to long the more for it. And the 'Imitatio' carried conviction to numerous souls that in it the echoes of Divine truth were to be found, and men could learn therein how they might approach God and obtain His favour without the intervention of others ; for it will be seen that this devotional book is suffused with the spirit of the Holy Volume, though it does not generally adopt its very words. There are numberless instances where a truth or precept from God's Word is inculcated or alluded to, as can be clearly shown, where the exact Scriptural phraseology is not used,<sup>2</sup> and this inculcation of the Divine Will was doubtless, among other causes, the principal reason for its wide diffusion and the ready welcome it received.

This point is forcibly alluded to by De Quincey, who while speaking of 'the little book which, in past times, came next to the Bible in European publicity and currency,' makes these remarks in a note : 'The diffusion of the "De Imitatione Christi" over Christendom [the idea of Christendom, it must be remembered, not then including

<sup>1</sup> Gieseler says of this period, 'The hierarchy was constantly opposed to all translation of the Holy Scriptures into the vulgar tongue' (*Eccl. Hist.* v. 74). And previous to this the reading of the Bible by laymen without permission was forbidden (*ibid.* v. 75).

<sup>2</sup> See the many references pointed out by Hirsche, in his *De Imitatione Christi, Textum ex Autographo Thomæ*.

any part of America] anticipated in 1453 the diffusion of the Bible in 1853. But why? Through what causes? Elsewhere I have attempted to show that this enormous (and seemingly incredible) popularity of the "*De Imitatione Christi*" is virtually to be interpreted as a vicarious popularity of the Bible. At that time the Bible was a fountain of inspired truth everywhere sealed up, but a whisper ran through the western nations of Europe that the work of Thomas à Kempis contained some slender rivulets of truth silently stealing away into light from that interdicted fountain. . . . The book came forward as an answer to the sighing of Christian Europe for light from heaven.' <sup>1</sup>

In another place, after alluding to the fact that he had read this book over many times, this same writer says, 'How prodigious must have been the adaption of the book to the religious heart of the fifteenth century! Excepting the Bible, but excepting *that* only in Protestant lands, no book known to man has had the same distinction. It is the most marvellous bibliographical fact on record.' <sup>2</sup>

In my endeavour to become better acquainted with the life of the author, I had recourse to the original accounts of him—the old biographies of Thomas à Kempis—from which the brief narratives of him I have before alluded to have been chiefly drawn. The most ancient of these biographies is by an anonymous writer, who was not only a contemporary of à Kempis, but had gathered together several things concerning him from his conversation with the Brethren at Mount St. Agnes, near Zwolle, where à Kempis lived till he was very old. Moreover, the many things which he learnt from the Brethren concerning the reverend Father must have been shortly after his death; for the account which he gives is to be found in one of the oldest editions of the works of Thomas à Kempis. There is a fine folio copy, in black letter, of this edition in the British Museum (1221, b. 11), which was published at Nuremberg A.D. 1494, if not

<sup>1</sup> De Quincey's *Works*, i. Pref. pp. v. vi.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* iii. 23.

printed two or three years before, since at the end of the volume it is said that it was 'finished on the vigil of St. Andrew the Apostle, anno Christi 1491, Nuremberge, being accurately printed by the artificer (*opificens*) Gaspar Hochfeder.' Giving some time for the printing of so large a volume, which contains nearly forty religious treatises of Thomas à Kempis, and some time for the composition of the account after the relations he had heard from the Brethren, the author must have written it within a few years of the death, and while the memory and recollections of à Kempis were fresh in the minds of his Brethren.

Mooren states that this biography of à Kempis was discovered in the library of the Rebdorf establishment, written in three different manuscripts; two of them undated, the third with the year 1488 attached to it; and estimates that the original MS. must have been written only ten years after the death of à Kempis.<sup>1</sup> Singularly enough, the account given by the contemporary biographer is not to be found at the beginning nor at the end of the volume alluded to above, but is inserted among the several works of Thomas on folio lxxxv. The volume is one of the rare treasures of the British Museum; for it is one of those existing witnesses which afford incontestable evidence to Thomas à Kempis being the true author of the 'De Imitatione Christi,' which anyone can examine with his own eyes. Bearing the date 1491, it must have been printed more than a hundred and twenty years before the fierce controversy arose respecting his right to the title of authorship when other claimants were put forward to contest it; and therefore the testimony of this biographer is independent of the dispute which arose, and came from a source unaffected by it. And what he tells us is this, that Thomas à Kempis, who wrote without question the 'Soliloquy of the Soul,' wrote also the book which is entitled 'The Interior Speaking of Christ to the Faithful Soul,' which is the third book [Tractatus] of the 'De

<sup>1</sup> *Nachrichten*, p. 195.

*Imitatione Christi* ;' and he quotes from this work incidentally as it were, not supposing that there was to be any question about à Kempis being the author, but to enable us to form some idea of his devout spirit and interior life.

And this testimony to à Kempis having composed the '*De Imitatione Christi*' is further confirmed by this contemporary biographer, who, at the end of his account of the reverend Canon of Mount St. Agnes, speaks after this manner : 'And because he wrote and dictated many treatises in his life, and few know how they are entitled, I intend to describe them, and write out a table of his treatises and books, so that all who read and hear them may know whose they are.' This was the more necessary because à Kempis, wishing to remain unknown, had sent them out at the first mostly without attaching his own name. This table or catalogue of the works of Thomas is found in this same rare edition which we have mentioned, but it is not added immediately after the brief biography of the author, nor at the end of the volume, but is placed on the first leaf, for on the front page are these words : '*Opera et libri vite fratris Thome de Kempis Ordinis Canoniorum Regularium quorum titulos vide in primo folio.*' And then over-leaf these words are prefixed to a long list of works, in which the four books of the '*De Imitatione Christi*' are, among others, distinctly named and described : '*Registrum. Tituli operum librorum venerabilis Patris Thome de Kempis Ordinis Canoniorum Regularium.*' In all thirty-eight works are enumerated, the four books of the '*De Imitatione Christi*' being designated by the first words with which each of the books severally commence, so that they are clearly pointed out. The fourth book is, however, put before what is now regarded as the third.

This important witness, then, is the earliest biographer of à Kempis, and he seems to have made himself fully acquainted with the particulars of his life whilst the recollection of them was fresh in the minds of those best able to inform him respecting the venerable saint. After



mentioning certain facts and alluding to some of his pious treatises by name, the writer thus briefly sums up what he has been saying : ' There are also yet many other things concerning his life and conversation, which I have heard from the Brethren of the convent where he lived, who are yet alive, the thousandth part whereof I have scarcely declared in what I have written. But what need I say more ? As he taught others, and as he instructed them both by word of mouth and by writing, even so he lived ; he fulfilled in very deed, or verified in himself, what he recommended in his discourses should be done.' <sup>1</sup> We may indeed regret that this biographer of Thomas à Kempis did not give us more particulars, more anecdotes and incidents of his life to illustrate his character ; but I may observe that he speaks of him in no uncertain language ; he leaves no doubt upon our minds as to the kind of man he was ; and in the words above quoted, especially when taken in connection with others to which I must allude, he gives us the key whereby to obtain more information respecting him—a key which opens to us a vast treasury and reveals to us what passed in his inner life : how he spent some of the most solemn and sacred moments of his existence, and what great thoughts filled, sustained, and elevated his soul.

The next of the ancient biographers of Thomas à Kempis to which I had recourse was Jodocus Badius Ascensius, another witness in support of his being the author of the '*De Imitatione Christi*,' who wrote '*Vita Reverendi P. Thomae à Kempis*,' which contains twelve chapters. This writer held an important office as librarian in Paris, and lived during the latter part of the life of à Kempis. He undertook the republication of his works, which appeared in the year 1500 ; and it was on this occasion that he added his *Life of Thomas à Kempis*, which he had drawn from trustworthy sources. And what is remarkable is that he undertook to edit his works

<sup>1</sup> *Opera Thom. à Kemp.*, Nuremb. 1494, fol. lxxxv.

at the request of the Benedictines of St. Germain des Prés, whose successors were afterwards the most fierce opponents to the claims of à Kempis being the author of the '*De Imitatione Christi*.' The consideration of this ought to have had some weight with those who were sincere and unbiassed ; but in the heat of controversy and partisanship such evidences were little heeded.

A third biographer of Thomas, who affords us some information, is Franciscus Tolensis, a Canon Regular of the same Order as that to which Thomas belonged, and who, though living later than the previous writers, was an inmate in the same monastery where à Kempis died and had spent the greater part of his life, and where he was able to gather up the traditions current respecting him and the general impression he had left behind him. He undertook to write the Life of Thomas, he says, for 'the love and reverence he had for the venerable saint, and because through him the place where he and his Brethren lived had become famous.'

Further particulars are gathered from what George Pirckamer has written '*Concerning the Life and Sanctity of Thomas à Kempis*.' This writer was Prior of the Carthusian house at Nuremberg ; and in encouraging the publication of the works of Thomas à Kempis he sets forth his character and speaks of him as 'that most wise, most sweet, and most religious man.' This was in the year 1494. Two or three anecdotes respecting our pious author are also found in a book called '*Speculum Exemplorum*.' They do not stand upon so credible a foundation as the writings we have previously mentioned, but they are given for what they are worth.

Still, however valuable these ancient sources of information respecting the life of Thomas à Kempis may be, they afford us but scant help in comparison of that which we obtain from the works of Thomas à Kempis himself. He was in more ways than one the Historian of the Brothers of Common Life, or of 'the New Devotion,' as the religious reformation with which he was connected was called. For

we must notice first that he has given us several short memoirs of the early Fathers and chief Brethren of the community, whom he either personally knew or respecting whom he could obtain, as he shows us, most reliable information; and among these he gives us the sketch of the life of the Founder of the Brotherhood, and how he was converted to God and was gradually led to the establishment of this Society. And through these memoirs he unconsciously reflects much of his own life. With several of those of whom he writes he was on the most intimate terms. And not only do we learn how they lived, their manner of life, their tastes and pursuits, but how great an influence they had upon our author—how his own life was modelled in a large degree after theirs, how he admired them and tried to live as they did; how his own heart beat in unison with theirs; and how his aspirations and desires, his aims and endeavours, were similar to what he details respecting them.

Then, again, he was the Chronicler of the particular House or community where he lived many years; giving not only a history of the monastery from its foundation, and the hardships and privations the early Brethren had to endure, but keeping a continuous record of all the important, and many unimportant but otherwise interesting, events that happened, up to the very year in which he died. He had joined the Brethren in Mount St. Agnes within a year after they had elected their first Prior, and was therefore well qualified as an eye-witness to speak of what took place; and in relating these matters he informs us of many things in which he must have taken part or have been deeply interested; in short, he narrates much of such events and circumstances as go far to make up the lives of most men. Besides keeping this Chronicle of his House, he seems also to have kept a record of other events not directly connected with Mount St. Agnes, but in which he and his Brethren were more or less interested, such as the formation of new branches of the Brotherhood in other parts, and such things as were worthy of remark that

happened concerning them, with an occasional notice of persons held in honour among them.

Then, thirdly, his historical labours were apparent in the devout writings which he composed for the use of the younger Brethren, as also in those for the perfecting of the more advanced in the religious life. And in these he not only is an exponent of the maxims and principles which were current in the Brotherhood, but of those which he himself adopted and had made the rule and guide of his own life. He endeavoured to infuse into others that devout and holy spirit, that intense love to the Saviour, that earnest following of Him in self-denial, humility, purity, kindness, gentleness, and longsuffering towards others, that renouncing of the world and its vanities, so as not to be of it whilst living in it, that cheerful enduring of afflictions even when suffering wrongfully, that holy trust in God's providential care and goodness, and all those other godly affections and graces which so much pervaded and adorned the lives of the Brethren, and so animated and sustained himself. And in doing this—in the very earnestness of his words—he cannot help letting us see, as it were, however much he strives to keep himself out of view, or so speaks of himself as if it might be of some other person, how nearly he lived and walked with God, how much the Word of Divine Truth had been wrought in him, what sort of spirit he was of, and what holy principles, desires, and motives governed and actuated him. His real life is in his works.

We shall therefore necessarily have frequently to make extracts from the writings of Thomas à Kempis other than those of the *Imitatio*, and to refer our readers to what he himself says, whenever his words seem to apply to himself, or serve to throw light upon his life or upon what was passing within or around him. It is through these means that we are able to gain a fuller knowledge of this saintly man than what is afforded us by his biographers; yet in the brief narratives which they give they indicate, as we have intimated, by what means we may know more of him when further direct information is wanting. And if at times we are tempted



to lift the curtain which, as it were, screened his inner life from the public gaze, that we may behold him in his most solemn and fervid moments, and have our own hearts inflamed by the ardent devotion of his soul, let it not be thought that we are wantonly violating the sacred privacy of his lowly cell or acting irreverently towards his memory; for we must remember that it can now in no wise affect the beautiful sanctity of his character—which might have been the case had this been done in his lifetime—but will rather bring it out into clear light and loveliness; and, further, will carry out—though by a way which he himself might have shrunk from allowing, but which nevertheless may be rightly and reverently done by another—that which was a great desire of his heart, viz. to promote the spiritual welfare of his fellow creatures and incite them to greater love and devotion, that they, seeing the light of his holy life and conversation, his intense love for Jesus and the growing conformity to His image, might glorify our Father which is in heaven not only in praises, but by giving themselves up in like manner as he did to His service, and by walking before Him in holiness and righteousness all the days of their lives.

The brief sketches which Thomas à Kempis gives of ‘the Brothers of Common Life’—not only in the ‘Lives of the Disciples of Florentius,’ his spiritual master, but which are found here and there in his *Chronicles of Mount St. Agnes*, and which we interweave with his own life—not only afford us a pretty accurate idea of the religious society in which he daily moved, and the sort of people with whom he associated, but on the whole it forms a lively picture of a faithful and earnest attempt to bring about a restoration of vital Christianity more than a hundred years before the great Reformation was fully affected, and shows how this was done, not only by a serious endeavour to preach the Gospel of Christ, but by the manifestation of a holy, loving, Christ-like life in accordance with it. There were causes which led to the ultimate overthrow of the work to all outward appearance, to which we shall revert before we close

these memorials; but the work was none the less real because it seemed to come to nothing, for there is little doubt that the seed then sown by this glorious effort was not lost, but sprang up among the people and bore fruit, contributing in no small measure to the coming of a brighter era.<sup>1</sup>

We think that these sketches by Thomas will be new to many English readers, and will form no slight contribution to the 'Lives of the Saints,' and will in fact supply an omitted chapter, commending itself to many as worthy of holding no mean place. For though there have been a large number of saints whose lives and deaths have been fruitful of holy instruction, and many religious communities governed by zealous and faithful men of God, yet shall we rarely meet with a more worthy cluster or galaxy of saints upon the whole, living together in godly union and concord, than that which Thomas à Kempis presents to our view, and of which, as we shall see, he was in a certain sense a representative man. We shall see how they

<sup>1</sup> In considering the reason of any great crisis in the world's history, it is necessary not only to look at the immediate cause of it, or the prominent actors in it, but to trace the providential and continuous process which led up to it. It has been well observed by an able but anonymous writer that 'to the apprehension of many persons this progress of thought is at ordinary periods imperceptible, and altogether escapes the cursory attention which is all that they can usually give to the more recondite antecedents of the events. The river flows underground; and through what subterranean caverns, or by what devious windings, it reaches the point where it may again emerge to the light of day they do not care to inquire. For them the "philosophy of history" is summed up in some few epochs which are the meeting-grounds of the slowly accumulated forces of previous periods; and at the violent collisions and blind heavings of thought which mark such periods attract their attention, to the exclusion of the less striking phenomena which went before. Their curiosity is excited and then satisfied by the thunder storm, and they omit to inquire how the electric forces were slowly stored up to admit of the sudden grand discharge which they so much admire. Thus, for example, a superficial school of historians are not unfrequently found to lavish compliments on a period like that of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, while they contemptuously pass over the four or five centuries before it; as, for instance, does Dr. Robertson,<sup>1</sup> who calls them simply "ages of darkness," the seats of "illiberal superstition." It hardly occurs to them to consider that the one period which they despise may have been preparing the way for, and necessary for the production of, the other which they consider of so great importance.'

<sup>1</sup> *Views of the Progress of Society in Europe*, p. 25.

attained to a higher level in the Christian life—one of great strictness and self-denial, but one that is not beyond the reach of earnest souls who steadfastly purpose to lead a new life, though they be not called to live in a community of Christians, as many of those were of whom à Kempis speaks—a life not of gloomy formality, or cold sternness, but one that would make the lukewarm hearts of many ‘to glow with lowly love and fervent will.’ It is, in short, but the way of the saints which Thomas à Kempis depicts, the way Christ bids us to walk in as we pass through the perils and seductions of a vain and transitory world to the bliss and glory of the heavenly country.

In filling up the picture I have occasionally made use of the chronicles of Windesheim also, written in two volumes by a contemporary of Thomas à Kempis, called Joannes Buschius, who not unfrequently speaks about the same persons and events that à Kempis does, since he lived in the mother-house of the same Order.

While engaged in the work of constructing something like a Life of Thomas à Kempis, everything in any wise connected with him became an object of interest. Besides the points already named I was anxious to know what I could about the several places where he had lived, and with which his name was associated, how they now appeared, and whether they had changed much since his days, and if so, what they were then like, and whether anything worth relating had occurred whilst he was there. Three places are especially named by his biographers, and are worthy of a pilgrimage for his sake, through whom they have become memorable—*Kempen*, where he was born, and where he lived till he was nearly fourteen years old; *Deventer*, where he went to perfect his education, and became associated with ‘the Brothers of Common Life;’ and *Mount St. Agnes*, near Zwolle, where he became a Canon Regular of the Order of St. Augustine and dwelt the greater part of his long life. These places were visited by me, and the result of my inquiries and observations are given. And being further desirous of ascertaining what

memorable events took place and what persons of note there were in the Church and in the world during his days, I made search into the histories of those times, and have endeavoured as occasion required to set them briefly before the reader ; for however secluded the life of Thomas à Kempis was, there was much that happened in which he could not fail to take an interest ; and some things there were which in all probability exercised an influence upon him and affected his views and teaching.

Though I have had the opportunity of referring to other editions of the works of Thomas à Kempis, the one I have chiefly used and quoted from is that by Sommalius, 1759, in three volumes. Hirsche's edition of notes to the '*De Imitatione Christi*' have been used also, and found serviceable. Pfarrer Mooren in his '*Nachrichten über Thomas à Kempis, &c.,*' has supplied me with much information in addition to what I collected during my visits to the above-named places and what I gather from other books hereafter mentioned. I have had the advantage also of referring to the observations of the Rev. J. M. Neale in his '*History of the so-called Jansenist Church of Holland,*' and of Dr. Ullmann in his '*Reformers before the Reformation,*'<sup>1</sup> respecting the work and lives of several of the Brothers of Common Life, among whom Thomas à Kempis holds so prominent a place. Two articles also in the '*Christian Remembrancer*' for the year 1853 have been of some service. There are some points, indeed, where I differ from those writers to which I allude, but there are far more where I agree with them and which I have adopted. There are many other works I have had recourse to which I need not now mention, as they will be named in their proper places. I will only add that while no stone has been left unturned to make these Memorials of Thomas à Kempis and the Brothers of Common Life as complete as possible, every effort has been made to add nothing that is superfluous or irrelevant.

<sup>1</sup> I have used the translation of it by the Rev. Robert Menzies.



The times in which à Kempis lived were sad and often tragical. There were many dark places in the land in those days, full of cruel habitations ; one power warring with another, and the petty princes making constant inroads and preying upon the people, who had to defend themselves as best they could, and often suffered great loss both of life and property. The greed for power, wealth, and dominion prevailed, and there seemed to be no great controlling or humanising influence at work to keep this savage barbarism down, had it not been for the fresh dawn of intellectual light, the earnest preaching and exemplary lives of a few devout self-denying men. Some little respect was still paid to religious Houses and the property of the Church ; but the dissensions and disorders that prevailed in the Church herself lowered her moral standard, rent her asunder, weakened her influence for good, made her too often but an instrument of swelling the torrent of evil that swept over the nations of Christendom. Instead of representing the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, according to the original design of the Church—bringing peace and goodwill to men, and promoting holiness and purity of life—it seemed to produce a contrary effect, and to contradict the very characteristics of its existence and the more important functions of its calling. ‘A more frightful and depressing spectacle,’ says one, ‘can scarcely be imagined than an establishment intended to guide and govern religious interests, meant as a blessing, turned into a curse by the wickedness of men. Such was, at the time of which we speak, the condition of society in Europe ; men felt that they were caught in a net, but seemed powerless to break through it, new meshes being ever woven as soon as the old ones were torn asunder.’

Under the influence of Scholasticism which formulated all doctrines, and amid the controversies of the Realists and Nominalists, and the dissensions between the Mendicants and the Secular clergy, religious life had become enervated, and Christian piety had degenerated into superstitious practices ; the formulas of faith were little understood,

and carried little weight with them ; to the sacraments a sort of magical virtue was attributed, called *opus operatum*, which acted independently of the morality of the priests and the faith of the laity. The people were taught to regard the priests as mediators between God and man, and that they had in some undefined and arbitrary way their destinies in the future world in their hands. The system of the Papacy and the conduct of its representatives led to irrepressible selfishness and ambition, and to a shameless lust for power and mammon. The Popes of that period passed through all degrees of moral degeneracy—from weakness to duplicity, and from vulgar cupidity to complete depravity. And what is said of the head may to a great extent be applied to the members of the priesthood. The pious Abbot Ruysbroek lamented that ‘for a hundred wicked priests scarcely one good one was to be found ; that Popes, bishops, and priests bent their knees for the sake of temporal wealth ; that visitations led to no improvements, but that everyone concerned got what he wanted, viz. the devil got the soul, the bishops the money, and the poor stupid human beings momentary ease.’

The great Schism which broke out the year before Thomas à Kempis was born, and divided Western Christendom for thirty-eight years, only added to the evils and scandals which prevailed. Two, and even three, Popes at times were to be seen struggling for the ascendancy, each claiming the allegiance of the faithful as the supreme ruler of the Church, each denouncing the other and those who severally opposed their authority, and each inciting their adherents to every species of intrigue, baseness, and wrongdoing to advance their separate interests. At one time the reader is horrified at the cruelties and even bloodshed which resulted from this unhallowed strife, and at another time he is shocked at the general wickedness and gross immorality which it engendered. It seemed as if all the principles and precepts of the Gospel were lost sight of and laid on one side ; as if the profession of religion was not merely a cloak, but the channel of iniquity ; as if those

who claimed to be followers and ministers of the humble Saviour had for the time become the followers and ministers of Satan.

There were not wanting men in the Church, however, who sought to put an end to all this scandal and strife, and to bring about a reformation in the Church full a century and a half before the Reformation itself actually took place. There were some great men and some good men that arose and came forward to do battle against this disastrous and unchristian state of affairs and conduct in the Church, and who laboured hard to restore peace and discipline within its borders. These efforts eventually led, in the first half of the fifteenth century, to the calling of the great Councils of Pisa, Constance, and Basle, from which the distracted nations of Europe hoped that an end would be put not only to the Papal schism, but to the crying abuses which were rampant on all sides, as well as in the government and administration of the affairs of the Church. But all was in vain ; the Councils proved utter failures in the end, though they had noble ends in view, were attended by some of the ablest scholars and divines in Europe, and projected and confirmed several admirable schemes for reforming the Church. Time after time the several Popes, who for awhile would seemingly approve of what was done, would afterwards, when they got power again, sometimes secretly, and at other times openly, set at nought the decrees which had been made, and return to their old evil ways ; and as there were not a few interested parties who sought to promote their own interests in these times by the keeping up of these disorders and abuses in the Church, the flood of iniquity flowed back again in every quarter. This occurred again and again, until the Papacy once more effectually gained the upper hand ; for though the schism was after many years brought to a close, other matters drifted on from bad to worse until they eventually culminated in a crisis which forced on the great Reformation.

Another formidable struggle was going on during the lifetime of à Kempis which caused intense excitement,

viz. the contention between the Churches of the East and West, between Rome and Constantinople, in which the Pontiffs of Rome sought to destroy the independency of the Greek Church and bring it into subjection to their own authority ; and when, because the Patriarchs of the East, supported by their sovereign and the people, would not acknowledge the supremacy of the Church of Rome, the Papal power—which aforesometimes had been so urgent in summoning the faithful throughout western Europe to take up arms and engage in crusades against the unbelievers, to drive them out of Jerusalem and from the Holy Land—was now mainly instrumental in withdrawing and withholding, or rather diverting, such assistance from being afforded to their brother Christians in the East, and thus suffering the army of the Saracens to come in and overspread not only the whole of Palestine, but other parts like a rushing flood, till Constantinople was at last taken, after a most brilliant defence by the last of the Cæsars and his people. Of this magnificent city and position, which was the key of eastern Europe, the Turks were thus permitted to take possession, to the great terror and injury of many of the countries reaching on towards Rome and subject to Papal domination ; and from many of these parts they have never been dislodged to this day, but have often overrun these Christian lands and devastated them with fire and sword.

A further fierce and bitter strife which arose and was carried on in the days of à Kempis was that which took place between the Church of Rome and those whom she regarded as heretics. In those days of terrible conflict and persecution Huss and Jerome of Prague were put to a cruel death for their faith ; and the armies of those countries which paid allegiance to the Papal Court were stirred up and hounded on, not against the enemies of the faith as formerly, but against those who chose to obtain a purer religion for themselves than they could within the Church whilst subject to the baneful and corrupting influence of Papal authority. The accounts of the habitual profligacy, perjury,



secret and open murder, that prevailed, together with the misery, bloodshed, and desolation then caused, especially in Bohemia, is most heartrending and awful to contemplate. Yet amid the frightful scenes and the sad disorganisation of society that prevailed during the lifetime of à Kempis there were immense efforts and large sacrifices made for the restoration of vital godliness; and there were many hopeful signs of better days to come looming in the distance when the light of truth would break forth in greater fulness and hold undiminished sway amid the clouds and storms that would more or less still arise.

It was an age when the revival of learning took place, when men began to think and act more for themselves in religion, trying to find their way out of the darkness that encompassed them. It was marked by the invention of printing, by an intellectual development not altogether confined to the Church, and by an earnest desire for more personal religion, not always dependent upon the clergy. There was a more conscious realisation of Christian faith—not of that unreasoning sort which takes all that is said for granted, but that which displayed itself in seeking to know amid many difficulties, what was revealed of Divine Truth in the Word of God, and both to rest and act upon it more. The supremacy of the Church was still acknowledged, but many were beginning to feel that it was needful for the State to have an independent authority in temporal matters; and the question was most warmly debated how far spiritual authority resided in the Pope, and how much in the bishops and doctors of the Church assembled in Council. Though some of the religious bodies that arose set themselves in opposition to the clergy, and afterwards fell into vices and grievous errors, yet in the awakening of that period there was in some places a large manifestation of real piety displayed and pursued in all godly quietness, and people in large numbers were brought back from a hollow profession, dull despair, and gross superstition to realise the blessings of Christianity, whilst to the earnest student a new career of enlarged thought and action was opened out.

Such was the state of affairs in Europe during the time that à Kempis lived, and what can be said of him and his Brethren of the Common Life forms a bright and hallowed spot on the dark background of the picture that is drawn of those unsettled and turbulent days. Once only did the storm of persecution reach them, and drove them away from their moorings; but for the remainder of his life he and they were allowed to dwell in peace, though the noise of tumult and bitter strife in the distance was heard and more than once threatened to come down upon them again and disturb their calm and hallowed life. No wonder that à Kempis should speak in enthusiastic terms of the quiet shelter and sacred privileges to be enjoyed in a religious House, and express deep thankfulness to God that he could in such a place give himself more entirely to the cultivation of the interior life and devote himself in no small degree to the furtherance of true religion. Though he shrunk from entering into public life as some ecclesiastics did, and would take no part in the religious controversies which prevailed and distracted the minds of many from a holy life, yet he took no mean part, however quietly he laboured in company with others, to effect a thorough restoration of vital godliness. For this inward reformation in the hearts of men they wisely carried on so as not unnecessarily to come into open conflict with the rulers of the Church. They sought to overcome the evil that existed in the Church and in society not by directly attacking the evil so much, as other reformers did, but by overcoming the evil with good, manifesting to others a better life, and persuading men to learn and embrace Christianity with a fervency whereby wickedness and corruption would not be able to stand or find a foothold among them.

It is to be remarked that à Kempis rarely speaks of the Pope or the Papal Court and its doings. Not more than two or three times in all his numerous writings does he allude to them, and that not in any enthusiastic terms. Still he loved the Church as the Society founded by Christ and His Apostles for the fellowship of all true Christians.

He regarded her as the Bride of Christ, which the Lord had called out of a sinful world to be His own ; hence he looked for greater purity, devotion, and holiness of life in her, and laboured for a deeper and more thorough reformation than that which the General Councils proposed, not removing merely the outward scandals, but one that affected the lives and hearts of men. And so we find him frequently bringing before us the admirable lives of the primitive Christians, the saints of other days, and the pattern of the Church of Jerusalem as set forth in the Acts of the Apostles, as if this were the model which the Church should seek to follow, and the conduct of its members that which those in succeeding ages should endeavour to imitate.

In person Thomas à Kempis was somewhat under the middle height, with a fine broad forehead and thoughtful, massive countenance of the Flemish cast. The colour of his face was fresh, with a slight tinge of brown. His eyes, when in repose, were large, grave, and bespoke a mind engaged in contemplation, as if he were absorbed in looking at what was beyond the present ; but in ordinary conversation they lighted up with loving interest and had withal an animated and penetrating gaze ; and when speaking upon Divine things his features would beam with intelligence, and both his look and voice would have an attractive effect upon those who listened to him.

As regards his personal conduct and religious views, the admirers of the '*De Imitatione Christi*' and those who desire to know something more of its author will be glad to learn further that he was indeed the pure, loving, self-denying, devout man which so many have lovingly imagined him to be. There may be a few points on which we may not agree with him. The ideal of the Christian life may seem to some pitched too high, and the religion presented to our view too severe. There often appears a suppression of the natural affections in the endeavour to subjugate self—a separation of the religious from the secular life which seems carried too far—and there is a clinging to

a few doctrinal errors and superstitious customs which all cannot hold with. Those of us who have been brought up within the bosom of the English Church have happily a form of doctrine resting on the firm basis that nothing is to be required as necessary to salvation but what can be proved by Holy Scripture; and we are naturally jealous of anything that has not this warrant, and are firmly opposed to whatever is repugnant to it. And it may be we are so satisfied with the fruit as to think little of the tree that bore it, and how those aforetime had to grope their way in darkness and to struggle with a terrible thralldom. Making allowance, however, for the times in which these men lived, and the social conditions of their outward life, differing from our own, we may often behold in their lives and teaching a closer conformity to the example of Christ, and a more literal interpretation and attention to His precepts, than is presented to our view in this too sceptical and self-indulgent age. But as regards à Kempis those points on which we differ from him may easily be eliminated amid so much that is good and profitable for our spiritual advancement and worthy of our attention; for though living in a dark and superstitious age, he became an ardent student of Holy Scripture when it was much neglected, and sought not only to be enlightened by it, and to shed its bright rays on all around him, but strictly endeavoured to make it the rule and guide of his life, and not less the foundation of his teaching.

Of his wonderful love for the Saviour it is difficult to speak; but it was so intense, and cast forth such a lustre, that a few, ignorant of his real character, have imagined that it made him oblivious and negligent of the love and regard due to his fellow men. But this was not so. Though he loved God his Saviour above all else, so that he was jealous lest anything, or any person, should intercept or lessen this affection for his Lord in any degree, yet had he been well taught, and had well learnt to follow the example of Christ, and the precept of His apostle, that 'he who loveth God should love his brother also,' since



from love to Christ he willingly spent his whole life in promoting the spiritual interests of those around him. There was, indeed, no loud display or marked singularity in what he did, for he was of a gentle and unobtrusive disposition, shrinking rather from notice and from putting himself forward, but he was none the less active and earnest in supporting every good work.

Though Thomas à Kempis is well known to have loved the quiet retirement of his cell, as the place where he found much true happiness in sweet communion with his adorable Redeemer, and in unceasing labours with his pen and thoughtful mind, it were a great mistake to imagine that he was a mere cold recluse and did not love the society and friendly intercourse of congenial spirits, and that his fervent devotion led him to care little for the welfare of those brought near to him through the providence of God. Far from this, far from his religion being selfish, far from his becoming exclusively engrossed in his devotions or in that which should be the chief concern of every man—the salvation of his own soul—it became the burning desire of his life to bring others to the Saviour, that they might love Him with their whole hearts and conform their lives to His holy precepts and example. There is sufficient evidence to show that he had a warm and affectionate heart, full of sympathy and tenderness of soul towards others. In early years his spiritual superiors were drawn towards him by his peculiarly sweet and unworldly disposition; he made some close and dear friendships with two or three of those living in the same house, whom he loved as his own soul, and with whom his mind was in sweet accord, so that their hearts burned within them as they talked together of Divine things. And in after years men's hearts were singularly turned towards him for counsel and direction; they loved to hear him talk, to be strengthened and encouraged by him to persevere in the narrow way; and so meek, courteous, and condescending was he that the humblest might approach him without timidity. This is amply corroborated, but it may here suffice to give the

words of one well able to speak on the matter as an authority. For 'this good and devout Father,' says his contemporary biographer, 'was very affable and consolatory to those who were weak and tempted, and exceedingly zealous for the salvation of souls, and desired that all might be saved, even as he himself; so that it was his main endeavour to draw others also into the Kingdom of Heaven with himself, by his writings and admonitions, by public instructions, and by all other means and ways in his power, as St. Gregory exhorts in a certain homily should be done.'<sup>1</sup>

It is a great fallacy for writers to think and argue that because a man exhibits a great personal love for the Saviour he must therefore have the less love for his fellow kind, and that because he is very zealous for the salvation of his own soul he is the more unconcerned about the souls of others, for this is contrary to truth and general experience; for who are those most concerned for the salvation of others? Not those who are indifferent about their own salvation, and think lightly of it, but those who have themselves felt the need of a Saviour, have earnestly sought for mercy at God's hand and enjoy a sense of His pardoning love. And thus it was with Thomas à Kempis. He is another witness to the truth that those who are the instruments of quickening others must first be quickened themselves, and that before they can communicate light to their fellow men they must have it beforehand in themselves.

So zealous was Thomas à Kempis for his own salvation that he was in truth an ascetic, and, like St. Paul, who said, 'I keep my body under and bring it into subjection,' he kept up through life a rigorous self-discipline. He felt in himself, as others who are quickened do, that the infection of sin was present with him, and that it was necessary to use severe measures to restrain the corruption that stirred

<sup>1</sup> 'Multum affabilis et consolatorius fuit infirmis et tentatis iste bonus et devotus Pater, et valde zelosus pro salute animarum, et omnes cupiebat salvos fieri sicut seipsum: ideo scriptis et admonitionibus, instructionibus, modis quibuscunque potuit, alios etiam secum trahere ad regnum coelorum nitebatur, sicut S. Gregorius hortatur in quadam homilia,' &c. *Vita et Opera Thom. à Kemp.* fol. lxxxvi. ed. 1494, Nuremb.

within him. At one time of his life he was in the habit of chastising himself every seventh day with the scourge, whilst he sung aloud the hymn commencing, *Stetit Jesus*.<sup>1</sup> He felt that the flesh was ready to lure him to sin, to indolence and forgetfulness of God, and therefore it must be kept in subjection to the spirit ; that the world would seduce him by its vanities and estrange him from his Saviour, and therefore he must renounce it in a more complete manner than is usually done ; and that covetousness, and a desire to possess things for himself, were apt to blind and obstruct the soul's progress, and therefore he embraced a life of holy poverty.

Thomas à Kempis greatly cultivated and commended what is termed the interior life—the living a life hidden with Christ in God. He is consequently frequently spoken of by historians as one of the Mystics of that period. Not meaning thereby a dreamy visionary, as the term now too often conveys, but one who recognised a supernatural power in true religion, and fully embraced a spiritual life ;—one who walked not after the flesh, but after the spirit, and felt that forms and ceremonies were of little value unless the heart were engaged in them. He loved in a special manner to hold sacred communion with Christ his Saviour, and to meditate upon Divine Truth. This intercourse with his Saviour was most precious to him ; and a pleasing anecdote is recorded of him, by the same contemporary biographer from whose narrative we have before quoted, which shows what a very sensitive apprehension he had of his Lord's presence, how jealous he was of any interference with it, and, however otherwise occupied, how ready he was to yield a preference to it. 'This good Father,' says the writer, 'when he was walking abroad with some of the brotherhood, or with some of his other friends, and suddenly felt an inspiration come upon him—namely, when the Bridegroom was willing to communicate with the bride, that is, when Jesus Christ his Beloved did call to his soul as His

<sup>1</sup> Franc. Tolensis, *Vita Thom. à Kemp.* sec. 12.

elect and beloved spouse—was wont to say, “My beloved brethren, I must now needs leave you ;” and so meekly begging to be excused, he would leave them, saying, “Indeed it behoves me to go ; there is One expecting me in my cell.” And so they accordingly granting his request, took well his excuse and were much edified thereby. And thus was there fulfilled in him that which is written, “I will lead him into solitude and there will I speak unto him.” And Thomas himself said unto the Lord, as it is written, “Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth.” Now, what he then spake unto the Lord, and what the Lord spake unto him in return, we have in that treatise entitled “Concerning the Voice of Christ Speaking inwardly to the Faithful Soul,” which treatise has this very saying for its text in the second chapter, “Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth,” the which Samuel the prophet spake unto the Lord when the Lord had called him.<sup>1</sup>

The religion of Thomas à Kempis was thus one of personal attachment and loving devotion to the Saviour. Though he was great in acts of humiliation and abstraction from a worldly life, exact in his religious services, and strict in maintaining a watchful discipline in many ways over himself, yet all was done in cheerful and willing obedience, and with an earnest desire to become like to his Saviour, and to be brought nearer to Him in his life and affections. He did not sink down into sloth, moroseness, or formalism, neither did he trust in himself or his good works, but in the mercy of the living God ; and while passing his time in loving fellowship with the brethren, in useful employments which contributed to their support, in actively promoting and encouraging every good work, he not only kept alive in his heart the flame of true devotion, but was one of the main instruments in stirring up and maintaining a like flame of holy love in the hearts of all around him.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Opera omnia Thom. à Kemp.*, Nuremb. 1494, fol. lxxxv.

<sup>2</sup> Gieseler, in his *Compendium of Ecclesiastical History*, says, ‘Among the small and peaceful circle of the religious Mystics no man exercised so important an influence as Thomas Hemerken of Kempen,’ V. p. 73.



I would, however, observe that in the above quotation we are pointed to what is now the third book of the 'De Imitatione Christi' for illustrations of the holy converse he held with Christ our Lord, and how he spent some of the most supreme moments of his inner life. And without at present entering into further particulars in this general survey of the life of Thomas à Kempis, I would briefly sum up what I have said by observing that this volume of the 'De Imitatione Christi,' which has been so long prized among us and is so well known, is but a reflex of his life, and that the one is in a remarkable degree the complement of the other. For these memorials of à Kempis and the Brethren will serve to illustrate and give a kind of living reality to the words of the IMITATIO, and the IMITATIO will help us to understand and realise more fully what the life of Thomas à Kempis must have been. All that is written in this precious book was well considered and digested by him, and passed through the crucible of his own experience, and nothing was recommended by him to be done but what, as we have been informed, he himself did. I cannot do more, however, as I proceed, than occasionally give a few instances of this accordance.

But it should here be remarked that though there is this close and happy agreement between the sentiments and precepts of the 'De Imitatione Christi' and the life of its author, these memorials are wholly separate and independent of that remarkable book which has caused the name of à Kempis to be so well known; for it will be readily perceived that he with many others had for some time been already living a life of holiness—serving God in quietness of soul, yet with fervent affection, shrinking from no discipline of self, sparing no effort to attain a lofty level of Christ-like godliness—*previous* to his writing the 'De Imitatione Christi;' and that this same kind of life of exalted piety was afterwards maintained and pursued to the end of his earthly career. The life, indeed, which he lived in zealously striving to do the whole will of God, and to become all and do all that Christ would have him to

be and do, gave rise to his labours in composing the several books of the '*De Imitatione Christi*.' His writings were not bare emanations of a heated imagination or fertile brain, but came from his soul and life. The fervent personal love towards Christ which glowed in his heart could not be satisfied with mere feelings and words, however rapturous they might be; his love must find expression and delight in doing something, in performing some deeds of love to manifest his devotion and affection to the Object of his love; and it chiefly took the shape of gently attracting and directing souls, and especially of writing suitable works of devotion for the use of his brethren in Christ and those who desired to lead a godly life in the midst of a turbulent and corrupt age.

And since, by reason of his religious training and the peculiar disposition of his soul, the providence of God seemed to indicate and open out this as the best way in which he might serve Christ and benefit His people, he threw his whole soul into the work, so that in reality it became a labour of love, one in which he delighted and for the perfecting of which he accounted no effort too great. In short, the life he had been living led to the bringing forth of that excellent book, and in a great measure may be said to have produced it. Before ever he began to compile it he could justly say with the apostle Paul, 'I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live: yet not I, but Christ liveth in me, and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.' He had been moving and breathing in an atmosphere more akin to heaven, associating with men of like mind and holy inclinations with himself, day by day pluming the wings of his soul to soar in sublime heights and to fit himself and others for 'the inheritance of the saints in light.' This, as I have intimated, did not make him forgetful of others, but rather constrained him to draw all men upwards to a higher and better life; this living in the unseen world in fellowship with the Father of spirits and with His Son Jesus Christ undoubtedly gave

that power and efficiency to his words which made them lay hold of men and help them upwards ; but this devotion and holiness exhibited by him were not dependent upon his writing the book. Thus the life of Thomas à Kempis may be viewed as clearly distinct from the 'De Imitatione Christi,' though the book emanated from the life and was one of its valuable results.

And so supposing for a moment that the 'De Imitatione Christi' had never been written, or it could be satisfactorily proved that it had come from the pen of some other individual, still the memorials of Thomas à Kempis and his Brethren have a special value of their own independently of the book ; they are of themselves worthy of some attention and deserve to be better and more widely known. The fruits of the Spirit are, of course, more or less manifest in the lives of all eminent Christians whose lives are worth recording. They severally manifest in their own peculiar way a likeness to Christ, a love towards Him, a devotion to His service, a conformity to the will of God ; but as among the divers trees of the wood each has its peculiar form, foliage, and loveliness, so is it among the saints of God. One can be distinguished from another in innumerable ways, and some are remarkable for excellency in one or more of the Christian graces, which make them to stand out above their fellows as more illustrious and worthy of special notice. It has been very fitly remarked on this point by a writer of eminence 'that each good man has his own distinguishing grace apart from the rest, his own peculiar hue, and fragrance, and fashion, as a flower may have. As, then, there are numberless flowers on the earth, all of them flowers, and so far like each other, and all springing from the same earth and nourished by the same air and dew, and none without beauty, and yet some have more beauty than others, and of those which are beautiful some excel in colours, and others in sweetness, and others in form ; and then, again, those which are sweet have such perfect sweetness, yet so distinct that we do not know how to compare them to-

gether, or to say which is the sweeter ; so is it with souls filled and nurtured by God's secret grace.' And thus in the glimpses which we obtain of the life of Thomas à Kempis and the Brethren throughout these memorials we behold a beauty of holiness manifested, a serving of God in all godly quietness, a constant recollectedness of spirit, a conscious sense of God's presence at all times, as well as in prayer and meditation, a sweet discipline in religion, a deep earnestness of soul, together with a childlike, sensitive, sympathetic heart ever exercised, which make him remarkably worthy of our attention and pre-eminently like to our heavenly Master. He had not the fiery zeal of the sons of thunder, nor as Luther and Knox boldly denouncing the errors and abuses of the Papacy, nor did he, like St. Paul, compass sea and land in missionary toils and perils ; he was an example of another kind, who teaches us how to serve God with entire devotion without moving from our place, without self-seeking, without noise, and without parade. The example of many whose self-devotion and zeal we admire we nevertheless feel unfitted, and not called upon, to follow, but that of à Kempis comes nearer to us and seems within the reach of the generality of Christians. He shows us how the life of a Christian in ordinary circumstances may be made lovely by the cultivation of the spiritual life ; how a lowly life may become sublime and heavenly, very near and like unto Christ ; and that however humble and retired our lot in the world may be, however insignificant and unnoticed among men we be, we may, if we will, like him, rise by the grace of God to a much higher elevation in holiness of life and devotion to Christ than is to be usually found.

One thought more. Taking for granted, as I feel fully justified in doing, that the '*De Imitatione Christi*' is the work of Thomas à Kempis, it will not be difficult to imagine how these particulars connected with the life of the author, and his association with the earnest and devout men of whom he loved to speak, will give a life and force to the words of the book of the '*Imitatio*' which they



would not otherwise have. The advice given to us by one who is himself esteemed for the goodness of his life ever carries with it a powerful influence, whereas the same sort of admonition uttered by another who is indifferent as to how he conducts himself loses half its effect, and with many it fails altogether, however much they may approve of what is said. Let us be well assured that a man who speaks to us is living after a godly sort, acting up to what he teaches us, and then the words of counsel on holy living will come to us with a sweet constraining influence; they show us a state of religious excellency and discipline that others have attained to, and the words spoken by such an one will come to us with far more weight, and win a far more ready and welcome reception, than those spoken by other sort of men, however brilliant and eloquent their language may be. Nay, a life distinguished by Christian graces will alone, without words, exercise a wonderful influence upon those who contemplate it; and if after this they come to listen to such an one whom they much admire for his godly and consistent walk, his words will not only be sweeter unto their taste, but will find a surer and more effective entrance into their hearts than other voices, however charming and demonstrative they may be. Thus not only has it come to be a true as well as trite saying that 'example is better than precept,' but we may readily conceive how much more powerful and operative simple and wise precepts are when example leads the way and shows us how to walk aright.

It is in this light, then, that these memorials of à Kempis and 'the Brothers of Common Life' may be viewed in their relation to the '*De Imitatione Christi*,' making it to be 'writ large' as it were, to come with greater reality and efficacy to the heart, and to carry with it a more penetrating, subduing, and healing influence, than even when it stood alone without them. For we consider it not only possible but probable that when the reader realises the fact more fully that Thomas à Kempis, and others with whom he was closely connected, pursued a life of eminent sanctity and devotion to Christ amid genial activi-

ties and brotherly fellowship, fully in accordance with the sacred instructions given in that much-prized book, he will take it up again with a fresh relish and attention, feel a greater interest in it than before, and it may be make renewed endeavours in many ways to profit by it. It is not only possible but probable—and may God grant it—that not a few may be stirred up and incited to a more Christ-like life, to seek a more personal acquaintance with Christ, and love Him with a more intense devotion as Thomas à Kempis did, and after that simple and persuasive manner he so pointedly and earnestly recommends every one to do in the ‘*De Imitatione Christi*.’

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#### APPENDIX (see p. 10).

WE cannot forbear giving one illustration of touching beauty, by a late gifted writer, to the value and peculiar influence of this excellent book. The career of a bright and affectionate nature is depicted, and a season comes when, checked by some temporary disappointments, a sense of loneliness and utter privation of joy steals upon the heart. No smile can be gathered from the sunshine. The shadow has indeed come over this young life, for every affection she has, every delight, was like an aching nerve. There was no music for her any more. She longed for books that had more in them than what she had yet read. “*Télémaque*” was mere bran ;’ Scott’s novels and all Byron’s poems were hardly what she wanted. ‘She wanted some key that would enable her to understand, and in understanding endure the heavy weight that had fallen upon her young heart. If she had been taught “real learning and wisdom, such as great men knew,” she thought she should have held the secrets of life.’ And so she applies herself to hard study for a time, and ‘a certain mirage would now and then rise on the desert of the future, in which she seemed to see herself honoured for her surprising attainments.’ For awhile she went on with resolution enough, though with an occasional sinking of heart, as if she had set out to the Promised Land alone, and found it a thirsty, trackless, uncertain journey. But, alas ! as days went on discouragement deepened, and tears filled her eyes, while she had to endure a ‘wide hopeless yearning for that something, whatever it was, that was greatest and best on this earth.’

One day in her lonely trouble she listlessly examines the books on a window-shelf, but one after another is laid down, till at last she takes up one with the title of 'Thomas à Kempis.' 'The name had come across her in her reading, and she felt the satisfaction which everyone knows of getting some ideas to attach to a name that strays solitary in the memory. She took up the little old clumsy book with some curiosity; it had the corners turned down in many places, and some hand, now for ever quiet, had made at certain passages strong pen and ink marks, long since browned by time. Maggie turned from leaf to leaf, and read where the quiet hand pointed. . . . "Know that the love of thyself doth hurt thee more than anything in the world. . . . If thou seekest this or that, and wouldst be here and there to enjoy thy own will and pleasure, thou shalt never be quiet nor free from care, for in everything somewhat will be wanting and in every place there will be some that will cross thee. . . ." Lib. iii. cap. 27.

Many other passages are here given from the 'Imitatio,' and then the writer continues, 'A strange thrill of awe passed through Maggie while she read, as if she had been awakened in the night by a strain of solemn music, telling of beings whose souls had been astir while hers was in stupor. She went on from one brown mark to another, where the quiet hand seemed to point, hardly conscious that she was reading, seeming rather to listen while a low voice said, "Why dost thou here gaze about, since this is not the place of thy rest . . . ?"'

Several more selected passages follow, and then again the writer proceeds, 'Maggie drew a long breath and pushed her heavy hair back, as if to see a sudden vision more clearly. Here, then, was a secret of life that would enable her to renounce all other secrets; here was a sublime height to be reached without the help of outward things; here were insight, and strength, and conquest, to be won by means entirely within her own soul, where a supreme Teacher was waiting to be heard. It flashed through her like the suddenly apprehended solution of a problem, that all the miseries of her young life had come from fixing her heart on her own pleasures, as if that were the central necessity of the universe; and for the first time she saw the possibility of shifting the position from which she looked at the gratification of her own desires, of taking her stand out of herself, and looking at her own life as an insignificant part of a Divinely guided whole. She read on and on in the old book, devouring eagerly the dialogues with the invisible Teacher, the pattern of sorrow, the source of all strength; returning to it after she had been called away, and read-

ing till the sun went down behind the willows. . . . Maggie was still panting for happiness, and was in ecstasy because she had found the key to it. She knew nothing of doctrines and systems—of Mysticism and Quietism—but this voice out of the far-off Middle Ages was the direct communication of a human soul's belief and experience, and came to Maggie as an unquestioned message.

'I suppose that this is the reason why the small old-fashioned book, for which you need only pay sixpence at a book stall, works miracles to this day, turning bitter waters into sweetness; while expensive sermons and treatises, newly issued, leave all things as they were before. It was written down by a hand that waited for the heart's prompting; it is the chronicle of a solitary, hidden anguish, struggle, trust, and triumph—not written on velvet cushions to teach endurance to those who are treading with bleeding feet on the stones. And so it remains to all time a lasting record of human needs and human consolations; the voice of a brother who, ages ago, felt and suffered and renounced—in the cloister, perhaps, with serge gown and tonsured head, with much chanting and long fasts, and with a fashion of speech different from ours, but under the same silent, far-off heavens, and with the same passionate desires, the same strivings, the same failures, the same weariness.'—*The Mill on the Floss*, book iv. chap. iii.

I would here also append some words of M. E. Caro from a preface he wrote to a new translation of the 'Imitatio' into French, lately published, as he takes up a point which it is desirable to keep in view in such a sceptical age as this, as a reply to those who think that such a high state of spirituality as set forth in this work is likely to be injurious. For speaking of the exalted tone of its Christian teaching he says:—'An ideal, raised to such an elevation, cannot be dangerous. For is it apprehended, we may well ask, that the study of the "Imitation" may spread through a whole nation the contagion of asceticism? Or do we really fear that it may dispossess each of us individually of his natural taste for this world's possessions or for himself, and transform us into a nation of saints and mopers? Assuredly not. But if this ideal, placed thus before our eyes, makes us attach a somewhat less value to riches, honours, vain laudations; if it help us to put off, though ever so little, an immoderate love of what is only brilliant and evanescent, to worship ourselves a little less—what is there to complain of? Do we fancy that there will ever be found among us too many men of a pacific, humble, disinterested character, knowing when and where obedience is due? Seriously, is any



one to be found, in an age so positive as ours, ready to cry out against the inconveniences of too much spirituality, or the peril of renunciation and self-denial? For my part, I would augur well, on the contrary, of a state of society wherein the taste for such meditations prevailed ; where I saw spring up anew, with the idea of self-sacrifice, a sense of what is divine, a manly and voluntary obedience to that rule which, in civil life, is called law ; of attachment to that enlarged cell which is called the domestic hearth ;—to those solid virtues, in fact, engendered by discipline, which render a nation invincible ; and to that general accumulation of religious belief which is capable of re-creating a conscience amidst the moral anarchy in which the world is tossed and lost.’

## CHAPTER II.

The birthplace of Thomas à Kempis—His Christian and surnames shown to be expressive of his character—His parents—The piety of his mother and her sacred instructions—The example of his father in the virtues of holy poverty, humility, and patience—How to account for their godly life in a dark age—The influence of Dr. John Tauler—His singular conversion and subsequent labours.

THOMAS À KEMPIS was born in the year 1379 or 1380,<sup>1</sup> at Kempen, a small but pleasant town in the diocese of Cologne, and situated about forty miles northward of this city, in the flat and fertile country bordering the Rhine.

Another town, it should here be observed, has been named as the place of his birth, very similar to it in sound; for one of à Kempis's early biographers, Badius Ascensius, asserts that he was a native of Campis or Kampen, in the diocese of Utrecht.<sup>2</sup> But in this he is evidently mistaken, for à Kempis himself says, in his 'Chronicles of Mount St. Agnes,' that he was a native of Kempen, in the diocese of Cologne.<sup>3</sup> Another writer also, continuing the chronicles of the house after his decease, states the same fact respecting him when recording the death of this reverend father.<sup>4</sup> Moreover the inhabitants of Kempen claim the honour of his being a native of their town, and have done several things to commemorate his memory, while those living in the other town lay no such claim. The error has probably arisen in the mind of Badius Ascensius from imagining that

<sup>1</sup> Both Eusebius Amort and Mgr. Malou give the year 1379, other writers 1380. The record of his death in the *Chronicles of St. Agnes* is in 1471, and it is there stated that he died in the 92nd year of his age.

<sup>2</sup> *Vita R. P. Thom. à Kemp.* ch. ii. sec. 4 and ch. v. sec. 2.

<sup>3</sup> 'Eodem anno ego Thomas Kempis Scholaris Daventriensis ex Diœcesi Coleniensi natus, veni Zwollis.' *Chron. Mt. St. Agnes*, ch. viii.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* ch. xxix. p. 137.

as Kampen, in the diocese of Utrecht, was not far distant from Mount St. Agnes, where à Kempis lived the greater part of his life, and contained two houses of the Brothers of Common Life, it was in all likelihood the place where he was born. And this error of Badius Ascensius leads other writers astray, for the author of the 'Life of John Kettlewell, the Nonjuror Divine,' speaks of Thomas à Kempis as 'that holy man Thomas à Campis,'<sup>1</sup> so that many readers are scarcely able to recognise under this name the same individual as our author, and it is only by the connection of another name mentioned with his that we are assured who is here meant.

According to the custom of the times, à Kempis afterwards took his name from the little town where he was born. His surname, however, was Haemmerlein or Hemerken. The former of these is the one adopted by the authorities of the British Museum, and under which name the several works of Thomas à Kempis, in various editions and translations, are found. It is the name used also by his oldest biographer, and was that by which he was probably best known in Holland. The other is the one more usually adopted by other early writers when they speak of his patronymic, and notably by the individual who records the death of à Kempis when continuing the 'Chronicles of Mount St. Agnes.'

The interpretation of the name signifies 'hammer' in English, 'maillet' in French, and 'malleus' or 'malleolus' in Latin. And the anonymous contemporary biographer of à Kempis takes occasion from this to show how expressive of his character is the name which he bore from his parents; for, says he, 'according to his name so was he both in words and works, "like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces." And this,' he continues, 'he was both to the devout and the indevout. To the *devout* he was so by striking their hearts with the Word of God, and exciting them by his writings to greater ardour in devotion, to higher advancement in holiness, and to livelier acts of

<sup>1</sup> Vol. i. p. 2, folio edit. 1719.

love and praise ; and he was so to the *indevout* by pricking them to the quick, by stirring their hearts to compunction, by bringing them to the acknowledgment of their own imperfections and infirmities, and by calling them to true amendment of life, as with repeated knocks and calls ; also by comforting the tempted and the afflicted, by strengthening the weak and faint-hearted ; and, lastly, by showing unto all—namely, to beginners, to proficientes, and to the more perfected, according to the difference of their several states—the way of life. So that this saying might rightly be applied to him, “ They that turn many to righteousness shall shine as the stars for ever and ever ”<sup>1</sup> (Dan. xii. 3).

Badius Ascensius speaks of à Kempis, after the Latin derivation of his surname, as Malleolus ; as, for instance, he calls him ‘suavissimus Thomas Malleolus,’ and again ‘Thomas Malleolus à Campis seu Campensis.’<sup>2</sup> This author also thinks the Christian name of Thomas, as well as his surname, prophetic of his disposition and labours ; for he says ‘according to ancient examples there is in the name a presage of future things,’ and that it was by a singular providence that à Kempis was thus called. Two entire chapters does this author occupy in unfolding this, but the chief of what he says may be given in a few words. Thomas, which in the Hebrew signifies Didymus, is in the Greek interpreted as *parted* or *divided*, and thence a twin. Hence this saintly man, we are informed, was remarkable for his twin or twofold love towards God and man, and for the twin culture of both the inner and outer life. And tracing the derivation further, he shows how he was *parted* or *divided* and separated from the world, the flesh, and the Devil. From the world because he could say, ‘The world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.’ From the flesh, for though ‘he lived in the flesh, he did not live after the flesh.’ And he was parted from the Devil by the sign

<sup>1</sup> *Vita et Opera Thom. à Kemp.*, Nuremb. 1494, fol. lxxxv.

<sup>2</sup> *Vita R. P. Th. à Kemp.*, per B. Ascensius, i. sec. I and ii. sec. I.



of the cross, by the invocation of the holy name Jesus, and by a most holy life. And drawing a most similar lesson from the interpretation of the surname to that used by the older biographer, he speaks of à Kempis as an instrument in the hands of God, to beat out of the hearts of men all wickedness, malignity, and error as with a hammer, so that it might be said of them as well as of himself, 'The temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.' But as in the building of the temple of Solomon no hammer or axe or iron tool was heard in the house while it was building, so by an antiphrasis the surname of Thomas foreshadows the peaceful quietness in which his holy life would be perfected and his work done—without noise from schismatic dissensions or the breach of fraternal charity, without a murmur from this hammer or any complaint during the whole of the time he dwelt in the company of others.

Though these remarks may seem fanciful, it should be remembered that the writers of those days frequently endeavoured by this method to set before their readers the character of those persons concerning whom they wrote. The name was a peg, as it were, on which to hang their words; and though now unusual, there is a quaintness in it which is not displeasing.

The parents of à Kempis, called John and Gertrude Haemmerlein, were held in good repute by their fellow citizens, but were only in moderate circumstances. His father was of the artisan class, and while he had to labour diligently for the support of himself and his family he set his son an example of honest industry, patience and simplicity in living. His mother is represented as being sedulous in the education of her children, attentive to the concerns of her household, active in her habits, very abstemious, not given to much talk, and extremely modest in her behaviour.<sup>1</sup> And what was more, they were both truly religious, for of them it might well be said, at it was of Zacharias and Elizabeth, 'they were both righteous before God, and walked in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blame-

<sup>1</sup> Bad, Ascensius, *Vita Th. à Kemp.* ch. vii. sec. I.

less.' His mother is especially mentioned for her distinguished piety and for the influence she exercised over her son Thomas in early implanting in his mind the love of holy things.<sup>1</sup>

There was in à Kempis from early childhood a natural disposition for a quiet and holy life ; he seemed sanctified from his mother's womb, and was one of those few who appear to have preserved from their baptism the gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit. Grace may not be hereditary, yet is there some ground for believing that children do many times partake of the peculiarities or natural bent of those who bring them into the world, and that it especially behoves mothers to cultivate those feelings and virtues in themselves which they would desire their offspring to possess, and that they should afterwards give the strictest attention to foster and develope the motions of God's Holy Spirit imparted to them. The seeds of piety began to show themselves in à Kempis very early, and were noticed by his parents and relations with no little interest. We are told that his mother was 'greatly affected with it, and made it her whole endeavour to encourage in him betimes a contempt of the pomps and vanities of the world, and to inspire him at the same time, day by day, with affections for heaven, and in pursuit thereof, for the humble and holy life of our blessed Lord, till the little sparks in his tender soul were by this means blown into a flame which failed not afterwards to manifest itself as he grew up in various ways, to the edifying of all such as conversed with him.'

Her teaching, though of the simplest and most practical kind, and such as a child could understand, was earnest and such as left its impression. It was not the mere knowing of truths and things that she taught him, as the doing of them—the living in accordance with what he learnt. Practice went hand in hand with precept. It has been thought that some traces of her religious instructions may be found in à Kempis's 'Manual for Children,' which contains short addresses for 'little ones.' As à Kempis advanced to man's

<sup>1</sup> Bad. Ascensius, *Vita Th. à Kemp.* ch. v. sec. 2.

estate he appears to have had a special love and regard for children, and to have had much faith in the value of training them early in the knowledge of God and of His ways. The remembrance of the holy lessons learnt in tender years at his mother's knees had silently sunk into his heart and had not been altogether forgotten; plain as they were, they were evidently sweetly brought back to his memory when he had to teach and guide others; and in the simple admonitions which he gives in the manual alluded to we doubtless have portions, or at least the character, of those sacred instructions which had left some blessed impression upon his own mind. They are very short, and each has a text of Scripture.

I have made a selection of several of these addresses, but I cannot do more than give two of them as a sample. One is 'On the Calling of Little Children to Christ.'

'Suffer little children to come unto Me, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.'

These are the words of Jesus Christ, our chief Pastor and our heavenly Teacher in the school of God, which He spoke to His disciples when little children were presented by their parents to be touched by Him.

These the pious Master and sweet Lord (as the holy Mark narrates) embraced, and laid His hands upon, and blessing them said, 'Verily I say unto you, whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein.' And again He saith, according to St. Matthew, to all them that would be great, 'Except ye be converted and become as little children ye shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven.'

O Thou good Shepherd and sweet Master, how sweetly dost Thou speak, how truly dost Thou teach! And in how few words dost Thou show unto all men the right path, which through humility leadeth to the kingdom of God!

These words comfort the humble and poor, reprove the proud and rich, and encourage the simple and innocent, 'for God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.' Therefore in all the good thou doest, speakest, thinkest, never go back from humility, lest thou lose the whole of what thou doest.

For no good deeds avail unless they be based upon humility, pervaded with the sweetness of charity, and be done with a pure intention for God's honour.

Avoid pride, the pitfall of all vices and the overthrow of all virtues. Be thou innocent, and as a child without guile, pure from all malice ; so shalt thou be dearly beloved of God and man, and shalt have peace in thyself.<sup>1</sup>

The other is 'On Entertaining Good Thoughts against Evil Ones.'

'Get thee behind Me, Satan.' O soldier of Christ, thou art to speak these words against all the evil delusions of the Devil ; for thy weapons are the holy words and works of Christ.

Therefore against all the fiery darts of the flesh ponder upon the bitter wounds of Christ ; against weariness of soul let the sweet Jesus be always in thy mouth.

Against all evil suspicions of other persons, and indignation at wrong-doing, think of all thy own faults from the day of thy birth, and cease to be angry at others.

When there is any time or leisure from outward labours, immediately let the Psalms and praises of God be in thy heart and thy mouth.

The heart cannot long be at rest, neither can the tongue be silent ; for the heart imagines good or evil things, or it pondereth over those that are sad, or revolves towards joyful matters, as the mill is turned about by the wind.

Lest evil things, therefore, should rush in and pollute thy soul, sow thou the Word as pure grain in thine heart, and diligently meditating upon it, turn it into food.

Would to God thou wouldest speak good words and pray as often as thou hast spoken idle ones ; and that thou wouldest ponder well over good things, as thou hast thought upon what is evil and hurtful.

Open thine heart to Christ, and close it to the Devil ; so that thy soul may be in heaven and not in the world.

Christ speaks to thee in every word of God, and in every book written with the finger of the Holy Ghost. For whatsoever thou reatest in the Holy Scriptures, whatsoever thou writest or understandest thereof, are the consolations of a faithful soul in tribulation and the remedies against the venom of the Devil, and they recall the heart of a wandering soul to its God in Heaven.<sup>2</sup>

The words are indeed suited for those of riper years who can profit by them, but they are such as will find a way

<sup>1</sup> *Manuale Parvul.* ch. i. p. 253.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* ch. vi.



to the youthful heart, and will afterwards bear fruit, in those who are piously trained.

It would be wrong, however, to suppose that the home culture of a holy life was fostered in the breast of à Kempis by his mother alone. She was eminently worthy of notice for this, and probably the earlier years of his childhood were moulded by her ; but the father took no mean part in forming the mind of his son for the future service of God. Especial mention is made of this by one of the earlier historians of à Kempis, who devotes nearly three chapters in setting forth the habits of life which the youth embraced and to which he became inured through his father's counsel and example.<sup>1</sup> John Haemmerlein's life was one of toil and hardship, yet was it adorned by the love and practice of holy poverty, humility, and patience. For it is remarked that as children are more observant of the habits and principles of their parents than most people give them credit for, and frequently adopt them, so Thomas was much indebted to his father for his having been early accustomed to these godly virtues which were taught him. In two places this writer intimates that à Kempis has recorded the impressions thus received in his book 'On the Three Tabernacles,'<sup>2</sup> from which it may be inferred that the counsels and sentiments contained in this work are, to some extent, drawn from the example and admonitions of his father.

To ascertain, therefore, in some measure the manner in which à Kempis spent his youth, and what were those means and principles which, under God's blessing, early and mainly contributed to the formation of a holy character, it may be well for awhile to revert to this work of his just alluded to. His book 'On the Three Tabernacles' is

<sup>1</sup> Badius Ascensius, *Vita R. P. Thom. à Kemp.* chs. v. vi. and vii.

<sup>2</sup> 'Ita Thomas debet parentibus, et non Thomæ, tot paupertatis, modestiæ seu humiliationis, et patientiæ præconia seu quæ cum sæpe alibi, tum opera de tribus tabernaculis habentur maxima.'

And again, after speaking of the virtues that adorned the life of his father, he says, 'Quocirca, eas in tribus collocavit tabernaculis.' *Ibid.* ch. v. secs. 1 and 3.

entirely taken up with the setting forth the nature and worth of the three special virtues of Holy Poverty, Humility, and Patience. It may be observed concerning the singular title given to this work that à Kempis represents these three virtues as three conditions of life, or under the figure of three personages severally dwelling in three tabernacles, and the eager desire which a true Christian should have to make his acquaintance with them and abide with them ; and hence he is led to give an account of them. The idea of the title is evidently suggested by the words spoken on the Mount of Transfiguration ; for the writer says, ‘Contemplating in Thee, O Lord, and in certain of Thy servants the above-named virtues, I find Thee to be the most humble of all ; Moses, Thy servant, to be very patient ; and Elias to have been in much poverty. I do also remember that they appeared with Thee on the mount, and after what manner Peter said, “Lord, if Thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles ; one for Thee, one for Moses, and one for Elias.” In these three tabernacles I behold as it were these afore-said virtues in which I choose to dwell.’<sup>1</sup> And though à Kempis makes two of these virtues as specially exhibited in two saints of the older dispensation, yet he makes all the three to meet pre-eminently in our blessed Saviour ; for, partly using the words of Habakkuk the prophet, he continues, ‘Yet will I rejoice in the Lord ; I will greatly delight myself in God, my Jesus, who is become to me an example of *poverty*, of *humility*, and of *patience*.’

Holy Poverty is in the first tabernacle, and Christ is represented as delighting in it and recommending it to the acceptance of His followers as the state which He embraced, and as one most suitable, safe, and profitable for man on earth, if he has regard to his soul’s welfare and everlasting happiness. Here are a few passages out of many which will serve to give the reader a clearer idea of its character :—

<sup>1</sup> *De Tribus Tabern.*, *De Paupertate*, ch. i. sec. 2.

*Christ.* Let blessed poverty, which I consider as a special degree of holiness, be deeply engraven on thine heart. . . .

Is it not poverty which I have chosen, and to which I have given a chief place among my treasures? Rise up and go with the shepherds to Bethlehem. Behold 'the Word made flesh,' and see whether poverty was absent there.

Behold My poverty and compare it with thine own, and thine will appear but little, perhaps none at all. There is a great gulf between My poverty and thine.

For when I was rich and wanted nothing I was not ashamed to become poor and indigent for thy sake. And oughtest not thou, who art poor and naked, and who broughtest nothing into this world, attentively to consider this?

Cease, then, thy complaints. I esteem it to be sufficient for thy consolation that thou intently regard the magnitude of My poverty.

It is not for the servants of God to rejoice chiefly in the good things of this world and to conform to its pomps, but to despise its delicacies and fly to the sweetness of My poverty.

Truly My poverty and humility are delicious to those hearts who regard the riches of the world but as dross. . . .

Behold, O Poverty, how they revile thee and detract from thy merits; but I know that thou dost not design any injury to them, but by My orders thou approachest them to heal the wounds of their breasts, and also to nourish those virtues which they possess. . . .

I know that thou art loved but by a few, and that sometimes thou art shunned with abhorrence. All these things have they done unto thee because they have not known thee, nor how great thou art in My sight; but fear not, for I have chosen thee.

I have purchased thee and consider thee more precious than all riches; from My infancy I have sought thee until old age, and in declining years I have not abandoned thee.<sup>1</sup>

In many other ways like this does à Kempis advocate this virtue, which has come to be regarded in the present day as only fit to be cultivated in the conventual life. And though speaking highly of it, he is no friend to that shiftless poverty which leads men to depend upon others for their daily sustenance; he gives no countenance to idleness or begging. Indeed, the Brothers of Common Life,

<sup>1</sup> *De Paupertate*, secs. 5, 6, 7, 8.

to which he belonged, were instructed to support themselves by the labour of their own hands, and were forbidden to solicit alms for a maintenance, and it was owing to this that they incurred the ill-will and hatred of the begging friars. No ! there was no pleading of poverty to awaken sympathy from others, no lamentations made as to its being a sad lot in life and daily pressing them down.

It is true that à Kempis inculcates a total divestment of worldly goods in embracing poverty, but we must not forget that this was chiefly in connection with monastic establishments, or where men and women could combine together in brotherhoods and sisterhoods, and it could be safely and wisely adopted. For though none of the Brothers were allowed to live in ease and luxury, yet had they some security against sickness and the infirmities of old age when no longer able to work, since in such cases they were still supported by the others. A moderate provision and foresight in ordinary life, however, as in the case of the father and mother of à Kempis, was not out of keeping with the holy counsels given respecting poverty. But there was a higher aim than the mere attainment of outward poverty, and without which it would lose all its spiritual charm ; it was not simply the giving up all that a man possessed of worldly goods, but the detachment of the heart from all those worldly things which men so eagerly desire and run after, and the freedom of the soul to seek after the things of God. This virtue of holy poverty was a fundamental principle in the life and teaching of à Kempis, and is constantly in various ways appearing in his writings. Nor is the virtue to be despised and set at nought, as it is too frequently in the world, for it brings before us that very spirit which every Christian should possess, even though he be not called upon, in the providence of God, to give up all his worldly possessions, since it forms the first characteristic, the first lesson to be learnt, in the school of Christ ; for when our heavenly Master opened His mouth and taught, the first thing to which He directed the attention of His followers was to be 'poor in



spirit.' Nor does it become any of the followers of Christ to find fault with the conduct of one who chose, literally chose, to follow the direction of our Lord, though it seems not to be addressed to all men, 'Go sell all that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven.'

Passing from this first tabernacle to the next, which is Humility, à Kempis shows how it differs from Holy Poverty, but is yet combined with it, and how necessary the one is to the other.

*Christ.* Poverty in pious minds is wont to be the guardian of Humility. Behold, O Poverty, behold her concerning whom I have spoken to thee. I have loved her from the beginning. Defend this Humility, for she is a special delight to Me in My saints. . . .

That poverty is not blessed which knows not humility ; neither is humility pleasing to God which despises poverty. . . .

Thy garments, O Poverty, are often mean and coarse ; but do not on this account cast them away, lest thou displease Humility. . . .

To be ashamed of the poverty of thy dress is the sign of latent pride ; and to glory in it is the vice of hypocrites.

The example of Christ and His saints are then in a variety of instances alluded to in recommending this grace of humility, and various reasons given for heartily embracing it. I cannot, however, do more than notice a few passages I have selected and pass on.

Behold, while passing through Thy Holy Scriptures, O Lord, I found everywhere the proud man as one that was wounded, and that he was rejected at Thy hands. . . .

Behold, the humble man remaineth in private, and always seeketh the lowest place, as it is written, 'When thou art bidden to a wedding, go and sit down in the lowest place ;' yet do not this through affectation, but from a sense of thy own unworthiness. . . .

One great sign of humility is for a man to acknowledge his faults when reproved. The proud, on the other hand, excuse and defend themselves, saying in their pride, 'No, I have not done this, or if I have I have done well ; if evil, not so very evil—not so evil as they say. . . .'

‘Many come to Me,’ saith Christ, ‘elated in heart, and I hear them not; they ask not that they may be freed from sinning, but that they may appear just before men.

‘They desire devotion, but they are unwilling to suffer shame with Me; they covet humility, but they dread to be despised by men, as the humble are.

‘They seek to love virtue without the hatred of vice, and are deceived in their desires, because he who would taste the sweetness of virtue ought to extirpate from his heart every vice and every evil passion. . . .’

Woe to you who believe that every great thing is holy, and who say to everything that is lifted up and applauded, ‘This is the honour of God! this is His glory! . . .’

This also is truly praiseworthy in the humble man, that he is found so tardy in joining the bustle of the world, and solicitous only to retain interior tranquillity; hence he fears to appear abroad too much, and delights to be hidden from the world, as if he were dead.

He studies to follow the example of the saints, to know the cause of his own frailty, and to keep in memory how the humble Jesus conversed among men.

Moreover, he reads the Holy Scriptures, and considers how deficient he is in virtue compared with the saints, and admires their exercises, labours, temptations, and self-denials.<sup>1</sup>

I now proceed to the third tabernacle, that of Patience, where I shall only stay to cull out a few passages, in which the sentiments of à Kempis appear. Coming into God’s presence, he spreads before Him his afflictions and infirmities, and earnestly implores help and the grace of patience, showing us the benefit of doing this; for, he says:—

It is often a consolation to the miserable to reveal his misery to a friend. And the angry wound, when it is opened, is less painful and more easily cured. To thee, therefore, O Father of mercies, have I made known my cause.

And then he would have us listen to these words of counsel that came to him:—

*Christ.* Do not be cast down in tribulation, because tribulation is a consuming fire. It purgeth away sin, however; extin-

<sup>1</sup> *De Humilitate*, var. secs.

guisheth presumption, driveth away dissoluteness, bringeth in a salutary sorrow, gives a distaste of worldly things, and leads a man to become an imitator of Christ.

Wouldst thou relinquish these advantages, since true patience worketh these things in thee, through tribulation? Do not seek for peace except in God, but strive after peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, which the world cannot give. . . .

When compassed about on every side with tribulations, remember that it is the way of the saints, through which they passed to the Kingdom of Heaven. . . .

Learn to comfort thyself also, because that in this thou art made like unto Christ Jesus, thy Lord ; and return thanks, if thou art in any small degree able to repay this to Him. For I say unto thee that is a greater merit in thee to suffer affliction patiently than to perform good works.

How many servants do I seem to have, but how little can they bear ; they are broken down by a little tribulation and are irritated by a few reproaches.

They are offended on the slightest occasion ; they are quickly overcome when any injury is done to them, and they think of many excuses when they are accused. But this is not walking in the good way ; it is very unlike Me (Christ) and all My saints.

Some also say that they have very little peace ; but I say that the reason ye have no peace is because ye have no patience. Yea, ye have no peace because ye are your own masters, because ye are carnal and walk according to man. . . .

The more patient a man shall be, the more will he enjoy peace. Yea, My peace is in much patience, in enduring evils, in despising worldly delights. . . .

Have peace in God, and not with the world ; peace not with your own vices and evil desires, but peace by fighting bravely against them.

Remember also in thy tribulation that all thy labour and grief will end in a short time, and that thy reward shall be eternal and abundant in heaven. And if thou canst not bear a little for a short time, what wilt thou do in the inextinguishable pains of hell ? <sup>1</sup>

These extracts from the 'Three Tabernacles' will suffice to give the reader a general idea of the work. And though à Kempis does not mention his father, or allude to him throughout, there seems to be little doubt but that he was reared in the exercise of these three virtues by his father,

<sup>1</sup> *De Patientia in Tribus Tabern.*, var. secs.

and early inducted into the practice of them by his example. Early habituated to them, they became easy to him ; nay, pleasant and fruitful in after life. When he went to Deventer and entered the Monastery of St. Agnes, he did not forget the lessons of his childhood, but faithfully adhered to the further acquirements of holy poverty, humility, and patience as life opened out to him. Thomas was early taught to be useful and submissive, to yield obedience and respect. And when not receiving direct instruction from his mother or assisting her in the house, he went out with his father to help him in whatever way he could in his several occupations ; this was more especially the case when about nine or ten years old, and whilst thus engaged he received many a word of homely wisdom and of sacred counsel, which was as seed sown in the heart, to spring up afterwards and bear fruit. Moreover Thomas saw his father cheerfully and contentedly accepting the humble lot of life in which the providence of God had placed him, unambitious of attaining to a higher station or being brought into notice, but quietly and gladly enduring toil, hardships, and many inconveniences without murmuring. He noticed, or at least remembered afterwards, how he avoided contentions and disputes, how he yielded subjection to those in authority and showed respect unto all men ; how sparing and frugal in his habits, not wasting or abusing God's blessing by any extravagance or indulgence as others, yet not selfishly hoarding up his little store, but imparting of what he had to others who had need, being very helpful and considerate of the necessities of those about him. And these things, though they seemed to come naturally, and might not be so much thought of by Thomas in his younger days, left their impress upon him, and led him afterwards to know the worth of that virtuous life which he daily witnessed in his early years.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 'In eodem parentum venerandi Thomæ tugurio, humilique casa, tertii quoque tabernaculi præsidem, familiarem sibi fecit patientiam ; quæ sanctæ perseverantiæ parens est cui uni laborum omnium reponitur merces et corona. Parum enim fuerit bene incepisse, nisi ad finem usque perduxeris. At qui



And though John Haemmerlein was one of the common artisans of Kempen, he had along with his wife imbibed the principles of vital Christianity, and together they endeavoured to mould their lives and that of their children by them. Christianity was no mere name or profession with them, but a new and living reality. There is little doubt but that they regularly attended the ordinances of Divine worship in the church at Kempen, and sincerely endeavoured to pay that homage which was due to the Almighty from all His creatures; but in addition to this it is evident that they kept up a fellowship with a few other devout and humble souls, who encouraged and strengthened one another in a godly and upright life. It is probable enough that Thomas often heard and listened to the pious intercourse and friendly counsels that passed between them. It is true they had no printed Bible in those days, and only portions of it written with the hand were to be obtained. These and other fragments of pious writings were precious and much coveted by them. They would lend them to one another, and read them over when they met together; and when they talked with one another their hearts seemed to warm with the love of God their Saviour and the bright hopes of heaven. And in the latter years of his stay under the parental roof young Thomas's heart was in no little degree sweetly drawn and early inflamed by what he heard to the love of Divine things and the desire of a religious life.

Thus the home training of à Kempis was in many ways favourable to the formation of a saintly character, and well fitted to incline him to embrace a religious life. As the picture of that pious home at Kempen is brought before us, in considering his boyhood, it seems to remind us much of that other lowly but blessed home at Nazareth

a teneris unguiculis, et primis incunabulis, in re tenui duriter educatus, viderit patrem assiduo labore, et in sudore vultus sui panem manducantem.'

And again, 'Quocirca Malleolus in paternis laribus, ad omnem patientiam, et inopiæ tolerantiam institutus, facile cum esset Daventriæ, eleemosynis ad literarum studia nutriendus, omnes labores, omnemque inopiam pertulit.'—Badius Ascensius, *Vita R. P. Thom. à Kemp.* ch. vii. sec. 1.

where the Saviour of the world was brought up, for in many respects the home of à Kempis was like to the earthly home where Christ lived in His youth; and it is pleasing to know that from his very childhood he was taught to love and follow his blessed Lord.

And here we stay to inquire how it came to pass that during this period, which is regarded as part of the dark ages, when there was such a decay of vital godliness in the land, and such a dearth of the Word of God, we find such an instance of sterling piety as was evidently exhibited in the humble cottage at Kempen. The fact comes upon us as a surprise, and it will be interesting to some to ascertain by what probable means this pious couple were brought into the way of righteousness. Now, it is well known to the student of history that about the middle of the fourteenth century there was an earnest and godly man named Dr. John Tauler, 'highly esteemed by the early reformers,' who by his powerful preaching 'had begun and promoted a very considerable reformation in these parts,' whereby the lives and habits of the people were greatly affected, and numbers were drawn from slavish superstition and gross ignorance to follow him in the cultivation of the inward and spiritual life of Christianity. Besides this there had been an endeavour to gather together into small religious societies all those who were awakened to a knowledge of Divine Truth and were wishful to live a new life in Christ. In various villages and parishes a few of the more godly thus banded together in holy fellowship, to promote among themselves true practical piety, and to encourage and stimulate each other to continue devoted followers of the Lord. There was no attempt to separate them from the Church, but the design was to raise up in her members a newness of life, a vital godliness, and Christian fellowship which had been sorely wanting. There seems little doubt, then, but that the father and mother of Thomas were brought under the influence of Tauler or of some of the missionaries associated with him, and were probably joined to one or other of these little companies of

godly people ; for, from some allusions to them by an anonymous author, there is reason to believe that they were more or less associated with those religious congregations or assemblies.

There is much that is interesting in the career of Tauler, to whom the parents of Thomas and the country were indebted for this awakening of religious life. He was providentially raised up to do the work of an Evangelist in a benighted age. Like an apostolic missionary, he went from place to place calling upon the people to repent and amend their lives. To them he preached the Gospel, making Christ and His salvation known, and leading them to embrace a new and earnest Christian life. His labours were extended throughout the whole of the Rhine country, but more especially did he take the large centres of population at Cologne, Strasbourg, and Basle. A few years after this a similar work of evangelisation was carried on northward—that is, in Holland and Gelderland—by another man of great devotion, Gerard Groote, or Gerard the Great, as he was called, of whom we shall shortly have to speak more at length, and to whose institutions Thomas à Kempis joined himself and was greatly indebted.

And in the pleasing task of tracing up to its origin this remarkable revival of true spiritual life in which Thomas was reared, and with the spirit of which he was so deeply imbued, it should be noticed that both these earnest, devoted men—Tauler and Gerard Groote—seem to have visited, for the sake of obtaining spiritual counsel and encouragement, a singularly devout man, Ruysbroek of Grünthal, one of the pure and high-minded Mystics of Germany, who appeared, like Enoch of old, to walk with God, having a deep consciousness of His presence ever with him.<sup>1</sup> Both of these men profited by their intercourse

<sup>1</sup> Arnstein, a devout burgher of Strasbourg, in his *Chronicles* gives an account of Tauler's visit to Ruysbroek at Grünthal. Arnstein, it appears, accompanied Tauler ; and he says, ' We remained three weeks at Grünthal, for whenever the Doctor would be going the good Prior so besought him to tarry longer that he could not in courtesy say him nay. Often Ruysbroek and Tauler would spend all the summer morning in the forest, now walking, now

with him, and were led thereby to submit themselves more entirely to God's will and service. The deep impression he made upon them, though in different ways and at different times, led them to exercise a greater influence among

sitting under the trees, talking of the concerns of the soul, or of the fears and hopes awakened by these doubtful times. I was permitted frequently to accompany them, and afterwards wrote down some of the more remarkable things I heard said. These two saintly men, prepared to love each other as brothers in a common experience, seemed at once to grow into a friendship as strong as though many years had been employed in the building thereof. Neither of them vain, neither jealous, each was for humbling himself beneath the other, and seemed more desirous to hear and learn than to talk about himself.'

Many precious words were uttered between them, and I shall therefore here give a few of them as selected from the *Chronicle* of the Armourer of Strasbourg.

Ruysbroek : 'The will is free by nature ; it becomes by grace more free ; yea, a king, lord of every lower power, crowned with love, clad in the might of the Holy Ghost. There is a natural will towards good implanted in us, but damped by sin. We can will to follow this better impulse, and of ourselves desire the help of Divine grace, without which we can never overcome sin and rise above ourselves. Everything depends on will. A man must *will* right strongly.'

'True penitence is of the heart ; bodily suffering is not essential.'

'True desire after God is not kept back by the sense of defect.'

'We cannot compel God by our love to love us ; but He cannot sanctify us unless we freely contribute our effort. There is a reciprocal desire on our part and that of God. The free inspiration of God is the spring of all our spiritual life. Thence flows into us knowledge—an inner revelation which preserves our spirits open, and, lifting us above all images and all disturbance, brings us to an inward silence.'

'At another time their conversation turned upon the corruptions of the times. "And what hope of better things," said Tauler, "while the Church is crowded with hirelings, and, with heat and bravery, everywhere leading on the world in sin?"

"What hope, indeed !" mournfully responded Ruysbroek. "The grace of the sacraments is shamefully bought and sold. Rich transgressors may live as they list. The wealthy usurer is buried before the altar ; the bells ring ; the priests declare him blessed. I declare that if he died in unrighteousness not all the priests in Christendom, not all his hoards lavished to feed the poor, could save him from perdition. See too the monks, mendicants and all, what riches ! what sumptuous fare ! what license in violation of every vow ! what odious distinctions . . . !"

"This," said Tauler, "is what I so much admire in your little community here. You have practically abolished these mischievous distinctions, the cause of so much bitterness in our religious houses. Everyone has his place, but no one is degraded. You yourself will perform the meanest offices, as the other morning, when Arnstein found you sweeping the lectorium. Yours is the true



men, and even upon posterity, than he himself appears to have done. From what has been said of them they seem to have been the Wesley and Whitfield of those times.<sup>1</sup> Both of them met with much opposition in their labours from the ecclesiastics of those days, and both were constrained to go forward with their work, though under altered circumstances, sometimes in new ways of action, which seemed irregular and unsanctioned for the time by authority, yet still cleaving to the Church, and ever striving to infuse new life into her. The more piously disposed were drawn together by them, and united in the bonds of Christian fellowship; other godly men were raised up to co-operate with them, and a fair prospect of some reformation in religion arose in those parts. The societies of Gerard were more lasting than those of Tauler, and hence the method and system adopted by the former, though essentially different, approached more towards that of Wesley than that of Whitfield.<sup>2</sup>

Tauler had been brought up under the Schoolmen, who were the chief theologians of his day, and who, though much esteemed for their learning, gave more attention to subtle disquisitions, and elaborate definitions of curious and doubtful points in theology, than to inculcating the essential truths of the Gospel. They laboured hard at the comprehension of difficult problems, but cared little for the practical development of Christianity, and while they informed the head they mainly left the heart unaffected and the life unchanged by the teaching of Divine Truth. They were ever learning and contending about abstract questions,

canonical life—the life of a family. Everyone is ready to do kind offices for his brethren, and your own example teaches daily forgetfulness of self.”

‘Ruysbroek looked uneasy under these praises, and they spoke again of the prevalent evils in the Church.’<sup>1</sup>

An account of Gerard Groote’s visit to Ruysbroek by Thomas à Kempis will be given shortly.

<sup>1</sup> Ullmann, *Reformers before the Reformation*, ii. p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> Neale, speaking of Gerard, says, ‘His mission wonderfully resembles that of Wesley.’ *Jansenist Church*, p. 76.

<sup>1</sup> Vaughan, *Hours with the Mystics*, vol. i. book vi. chap. vii.

but never or very rarely able to bring their hearers to the knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus, and to make the pursuit of religion a personal matter, an earnest real thing in their daily life. As a whole scholasticism was a lifeless thing, and necessarily confined to a few; for though it produced some illustrious men, and brought forth some valuable works which have their use and are highly to be valued, yet it was powerless to impress the mass of the people and to lead them into the path of holiness. It rather diverted the mind from the essence and the simplicity of the Gospel and the following of Christ.<sup>1</sup> Tauler tells us in one of his sermons that the doctors under whom he received instruction were for 'ever turning over the leaves of huge books, but they cared little for the Book of Life.'

Mysticism, which was then exerting an influence in the country, and which in its pure and practical character may here be regarded as the spirit of Christianity, may have early had an influence over Tauler; but it was not until the later years of his life that he laid aside the scholastic system of theology, and sought to preach the Gospel in all its power, and with a plainness that it might be comprehended by the humblest understanding. It was

<sup>1</sup> Speaking of the Schoolmen, an anonymous but excellent writer says, 'Considering them as to their metaphysical researches, they fatigued their readers in the pursuit of endless abstractions and distinctions; and their design seems rather to have been accurately to arrange and define the objects of thought than to explore the mental faculties themselves. The nature of particular ideas, time, space, infinity, together with the mode of existence to be ascribed to the Supreme Being, chiefly engaged the attention of the mightiest minds in the Middle Ages. Acute in the highest degree, and endued with a wonderful patience of thinking, they yet, by a mistaken direction of their powers, wasted themselves in endless logomachies, and displayed more of a teasing subtlety than of philosophical depth. They chose rather to strike into the dark and intricate by-paths of metaphysical science than to pursue a career of useful discovery; and as their disquisitions were neither adorned by taste nor reared on a basis of extensive knowledge, they gradually fell into neglect when juster views in philosophy made their appearance. Still they will remain a mighty monument of the utmost which the mind of man can accomplish in the field of abstraction.' Some of the most famous of these men were Damascene, Peter Lombard, Alex. Hales, Bonaventura, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and Durandus.

not the learning of the Schoolmen that the people wanted to hear, but of Christ and His salvation. Tauler was a man of great natural ability, and had been for some time very popular, attracting large assemblies ; for many persons from various parts of the country flocked to hear him. Still he was nearly fifty years of age before he began his great work, and then he wholly changed the style and matter of his discourses ; for, entirely abandoning his Latin quotations and skilfully worded syllogisms, by which he astonished men at his learning, but touched not their hearts, he now began to preach in the German tongue and to make known the glad tidings of the Saviour's love and His death for them, and simply sought to win them to Christ and to become His ; and this he did with such power and unction that multitudes were converted to the Lord and brought to live a new life in Him.

The story of Tauler's conversion, or rather the further enlightenment of his soul in Divine Truth—entailing a closer and more conscious union with Christ, and a living to Him through the help of the Holy Spirit—is very remarkable. When in the height of his popularity, and while crowds from all sides gathered around him, especially at Basle and Strasbourg, he suddenly came to another mind. It was at the latter town that this great change came over him. And in this way was it brought about : There came from a distance a layman—' rich in grace '—to hear him preach. He said he had been warned three times in a dream to come. For twelve weeks he sat not far from the pulpit when the master preached, and listened to him with thoughtful, searching earnestness ; and he perceived that he was a very loving, gentle, good-hearted man, and had a good understanding of the Scriptures, but was dark as to the light of grace ; and the man's heart yearned over him. So he sought an interview with Tauler, and said, ' I have travelled a good thirty leagues to hear you preach, and now I wish to make my confession to you, and to receive the Sacrament at your hands.' This being accordingly done, he solicited Tauler to explain to him

fully in a sermon how it was practicable for a man to reach perfection, and to live as near to God on earth as it was possible for a man to do.

Tauler consented, and took for his text, 'Behold an Israelite indeed.' The sermon contained twenty-four articles as to whom the truly righteous man is, spoken of by Christ, and Tauler explained his views with all the scholastic art that he possessed. His hearer was far from satisfied, however. The man returned to his lodgings, wrote out the sermon, and then brought it to the preacher. With some deference he acknowledged that Tauler was no common preacher and had made a good discourse. He then offered to give the master counsel, but Tauler was unwilling at first to listen to him, seeing that he was but a layman. The layman, however, soon assumed a sterner tone, and spake with authority, as if he had been a man sent from God. 'Thou art yet in slavery to the letter,' he said; 'thou knowest not the life-giving Spirit: thou art but a Pharisee, though not a false one; thou trustest especially to one creature; thou trustest in thine own power, in thine own learning; thou thinkest that thou seekest God's power, and thou seekest thine own. Thou needest to be taught by a Master who is above all doctors.'

Tauler was amazed and confounded. 'Never man before reproved me for my sins.' But being a true man he recognised his image in the mirror presented to his view; he felt convicted and promised amendment. The layman told Tauler something of his own spiritual history. 'Twelve years,' said he, when rebuking the self-righteousness of the preacher, 'twelve years I have been toiling to the height of spiritual perfection by the study of German writings, self-mortification, and chastisement; but the first thing that helped me was a sincere and utter self-surrender and humbleness of mind.' As to austerities, he said they were not good for all alike; the Devil was willing enough for some to practise them, that they might the sooner be sickened of religion. He counselled Tauler to give up preaching for a time, to go into retirement, and to follow



some simple rules of holy living till he had attained true newness of life by conformity to the image of our Lord. Tauler submitted and followed the direction he received. For more than two years he remained silent, notwithstanding the entreaties of his friends and the taunts of his enemies. Although he did not resort to excessive discipline, his new mode of life attracted the observation of those around him ; his spiritual children no longer came to confess to him ; men seemed to despise him ; and he fell into a state of weakness and despondency. And once when lying sick in his cell meditating on the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ and his own unworthiness, he heard a wondrous voice inwardly saying to him, ' Stand fast in thy peace, and trust God, for He can heal the sick,' at which he was wonderfully comforted.

The brave man was learning to die unto self and to live for Christ more entirely. Afterwards being renewed in strength, he sent for the pious layman to visit him, who, when he came, rejoiced with him, and bid him not despair. He counselled him to persevere in laying the foundation of a new life with God, and promised him that he would now, by the light of the Holy Spirit, understand the Scriptures in their unity and preach eternal life with singular success. At length, after having passed through a season of inward conflict and devout exercise, he again, at the instigation of his spiritual father, appeared as a preacher. On the first occasion he was so deeply moved that he broke down with floods of tears and could not proceed. This provoked greater offence. The undaunted layman came to him again, and bid him try a second time and put away all thoughts of himself. And this time he was successful. His discourse was upon the text, ' Behold, the bridegroom cometh ; go ye out to meet him,' and produced a deep impression. From that time the master increased in wisdom as well as in reputation, in the large towns as well as throughout the country, and to such a degree that he was consulted both on spiritual and temporal matters by great numbers, who universally honoured his counsel by obeying it.

The layman who exercised so powerful an influence over Tauler was the famous Nicolas of Basle.<sup>1</sup> Nicolas was the great leader of a religious society called 'the Friends of God'—Mystics of the highest class, each of whom believed himself in direct communion with the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Nicolas, somewhat like Irving of modern times, had a commanding ability and authority, which he exercised not only over his followers but over most of those who came in contact with him. He once went to Rome, and ventured even to reproach the Pope (Gregory XI.) for his sins and slothfulness. 'Gregory, at first indignant, was overawed by the commanding holiness of Nicolas.' He lived many years after Tauler died—suffered much persecution, and was at last burnt at the stake for propagating the faith he held and condemning the evil lives of those in authority.

Tauler after his conversion taught men to trust more entirely in God their Saviour, and to follow him in all lowly obedience, self-denial, poverty of spirit, together with a love of the brethren and a faithful discharge of the duties incumbent upon them. The Pope had laid his interdict upon the whole country, when the black plague broke out, which carried away 16,000 in Strasbourg and 14,000 in Basle; but amid the whole confusion and despair of this terrible season Tauler and his companions went among the people who were untended and unsolved by the clergy, assisting them, and comforting them with the blessed hopes of the everlasting Gospel; telling them that 'Christ died for all men, and that the Pope could not by his interdict close heaven against the innocent.' Tauler had afterwards to fly for his life, but after

<sup>1</sup> He was a great lover of poverty and retirement. With twelve of his friends or disciples he set forth from Oberland to seek seclusion for awhile. Having obtained permission from the Duke of Austria, they built a chapel and a pleasant chamber for each. Here they dwelt as recluses, not as monks, for they were under no vows, but paid a willing obedience instead to their superior; well withdrawn from the world, but well informed of what passed in it. (See note in Milman's *Lat. Christ.* book xiv. ch. vii.)

awhile made his appearance again at Cologne, carrying on his one blessed work of simply making Christ and His salvation known to the people, and bringing them to the Saviour.

Eventually he returned to Strasbourg, his native city, and died there in the year 1361, in the 71st year of his age, being fondly tended and consoled by his only sister, a devout and pious nun ; in the garden of the convent to which she belonged he passed his last hours.

On his death bed he sent once again for his mysterious friend, and was greatly comforted by his presence. And ere he died he gave him some papers, the substance of his discourses for twenty years, to make a book for the benefit of their fellow Christians. He was very anxious that it should come forth anonymously, and enjoined Nicolas not to attach his name to it, neither to let anyone in the city see it, lest they should know that it was his. This is thought by some to be the book generally known by the name of 'German Theology,' a remarkable work in which there is an earnest endeavour to deliver Christianity from torpid forms and revive its spiritual and life-giving character. It repeatedly and plainly insists upon inward religious experience and practice, and upon individual faith. Luther, in his preface to it, writes these words: 'I must say that I have not met with any book, except the Bible and St. Augustine, from which I have learnt, and shall learn, more of the nature of God, Christ, mankind, and all things.' And again, 'God grant that this book may be better known.' But, whether Tauler was the author of this book or no, it is certain that Luther thought most highly of what Tauler wrote. In his letter to Spalatin (1516) he says, 'If thou takest pleasure in becoming acquainted with the true devotion as it was received in olden times in the German tongue, buy Dr. John Tauler's sermons. I have never met in German or Latin a sounder theology, and which agreed more completely with the Gospel.' And in another place he says, 'Although unknown to the divines of the schools,

I know that Tauler gives us more pure doctrine than all the books of the teachers at the universities.' <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Winkworth, *Life and Times of Tauler*; Ullmann, *Reformers before the Reformation*, ii. 203-213; Milman, *Latin Christianity*, book xiv. chap. vii., from which works this account is mainly drawn.

Many of the incidents relating to Dr. Tauler are strikingly corroborated by a manuscript Chronicle found in the archives of Strasbourg, from which some passages have been but lately quoted, purporting to have been written by one Adolf Arnstein, who lived in the fourteenth century and kept a record of what he saw and heard. From this Chronicle I shall venture to give a few extracts, as they cannot fail to be interesting.

'1339, *December. St. Barbara's Day*.—Three days ago, at the close of his sermon, Dr. Tauler said he would preach to-day on the highest perfection attainable in this life. Went to hear him. The cloister chapel crowded long before the time. He began by telling us that he had much to say, and so would not to-day preach from the Gospel according to his wont, and moreover would not put much Latin into his sermon, but would make good all he taught with Holy Writ. Then he went on to preach on the necessity of dying utterly to the world and to our own will, and to yield ourselves up, "dying-wise," into the hands of God. He gave further four-and-twenty marks whereby we may discern who are the true, righteous, illuminated, contemplative men of God.

'Observed close under the pulpit a stranger (by his dress from the Oberland), who did diligently write down from time to time what the Doctor said—a man of notable presence, in the prime of life, with large piercing eyes under shaggy brows, eagle nose, thoughtful head—altogether so royal a man I never saw before. He mingled with the crowd after the sermon, and I could not learn who he was. Several others as curious, but no wiser than myself. This mysterious personage may perhaps be one of the 'Friends of God,' who are numerous in the Oberland. Methought he wished to escape notice.'

'1340, *January. Eve of St. Agnes*.—Strange; nothing has been seen of the Doctor for this whole month. His penitents are calling continually at the convent, craving admittance to their confessor, but he will see no one. He is not ill, they say, and takes his part in the convent services with the rest, but never stirs beyond the walls. None of his friends can tell us what is the matter. . . .'

'1342, *New Year's Day*.—Public notice given that in three days Tauler will preach once more. 'The news makes great talk. My heart sings "Jubilate" thereat. I look back on the two weary years that he has now been hidden from those who so need him.'

'1342, *January 6*.—Alas that I should have to write what now I must. I forced a way into the crowded church—every part filled with people, wedged in below so that they could not move, clustered like bees where they had climbed above into every available place, and a dense mass in the porch besides. The Doctor came, looking woefully ill, changed as I scarce ever saw a man, to live. He mounted the lectorium, held his cap before his eyes, and said, "O merciful and eternal God, if it be Thy will, give me so to speak that Thy name may be praised and honoured, and these men bettered thereby."



Whether the father and mother of Thomas à Kempis came under the direct instruction of Tauler, or only under

‘With that he began to weep. We waited breathless. Still he wept and could speak no word, his sobs audible in the stillness, and the tears making their way through his fingers as he hid his face in his hands. This continued till the people grew restless. Longer yet, with more manifest discontent. At last a voice cried out from the people (I think it was that rough-spoken Carvel, the butcher), “Now then, sir, how long are we to stop here? It is getting late; if you don’t mean to preach let us go home.”

‘I saw that Tauler was struggling to collect himself by prayer, but his emotion became only the more uncontrollable, and at last he said with a broken voice—

“Dear brethren, I am sorry from my heart to have kept you so long, but at this time I cannot possibly speak to you. Pray God for me that He would help me, and I may do better at another time.”

‘So we went away, and the report thereof was presently all over Strasbourg.’

‘1342, *January 23*.—Tauler preached to-day in the chapel of the nunnery of St. Agatha, on “Behold the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him.” A wondrous discourse—a torrent that seems to make me dizzy yet. As he was describing, more like an angel than a man, the joy of the bridegroom, a man cried out, “It is true!” and fell senseless on the floor. . . .’

‘1344, *March*.—Tauler hath of late, besides preaching constantly as ever, begun to send forth from time to time sundry small books, full of consolation and godly counsel for these days. Copies of them are fast multiplied, and people gather together to hear them read at each other’s houses. This is a new thing and works powerfully.’

‘1344, *Eve of St. Dionysius*.—I here set down passages from sermons I have at sundry times heard Dr. Tauler preach. I have made it my wont to go straight home as soon as the service has been ended, and write what I could best remember. The goodly sayings which follow are copied from those imperfect records, and placed here for my edification, and that of my children and others after me.’

I shall here give a few of these which I have selected as taken from the Arnstein Chronicle, since they will afford us an illustration of that kind of religious teaching which the parents of Thomas à Kempis received, and doubtless inculcated and transmitted to their sons.

‘God pours Himself out thus into our spirits, as the sun rays forth its natural light into the air and fills it with sunshine, so that no eye can tell the difference between the sunshine and the air. If the union of the sun and the air cannot be distinguished, how far less this Divine union of the created and the Uncreated Spirit! . . . Moreover, if a man, while busy in this lofty inward work, were called by some duty in the providence of God to cease therefrom, and cook a broth for some sick person, or any other such service, he should do so willingly and with great joy.’

‘This I say, that if it happened to me that I had to forsake such work and go out to preach or aught else, I should go cheerfully, believing not only that God would be with me, but that He would vouchsafe me, it may be, even greater grace and blessing in that external work undertaken out of true love

those preachers acting in concert with him, does not clearly appear. Suffice it that they were among the number of those who were devoutly affected by this religious movement of which Tauler was the mainspring. The fruits of his preaching were seen throughout the whole of the countries bordering the Rhine, which was the great highway for commerce. And though mention is made of the parents of Thomas only, as exemplary specimens of the effect which was wrought, there were multitudes of others who were greatly blessed by Tauler's mission. Not only were many priests converted to a saving faith, and others drawn into retirement from the world, but many more quietly abiding in their several callings in life manifested forth the blessed fact that they had not received the Word of God in vain. This is but another illustration of the truth that even when things are at the worst—when the decay of piety has become general and true religion is at its lowest ebb—God does not leave Himself without witness, but calls up some one or other to vindicate His truth and to comfort and guide His people.

in the service of my neighbour than I could perhaps receive in my season of loftiest contemplation.'

'Our righteousness and holiness, as the prophet saith, is but filthiness. Therefore must we build not on our own righteousness, but on the righteousness of God, and trust not in our own words, works, or ways, but alone in God. . . .'

In the course of the same sermon he described *humility* as 'indispensable to such perfectness (where God works immediately in the transformed soul), since the loftiest trees send their roots down deepest. He said that we should not distress ourselves if we had not detailed to our confessor all the shortcomings and sins of our hearts, but confess to God and ask His mercy. No ecclesiastical absolution can help us unless we are contrite for our sins before God. We are not to keep away from the Lord's Body because we feel so deeply our unworthiness to partake of the Sacrament, seeing that they who are whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.'

'There are those who thoughtlessly maim and torture their miserable flesh, and yet leave untouched the inclinations which are the root of evil in their hearts. Ah, my friend, what hath thy poor body done to thee, that thou shouldst so torment it? Oh folly! mortify and slay thy sins, not thine own flesh and blood.'—Vaughan, *Hours with the Mystics*, vol. i. Book vi. chs. v. v., a book full of curious matter on religious subjects.

## CHAPTER III.

A description of Kempen—Reasons why à Kempis does not dilate on the beauties of Nature—The origin and early history of Kempen—Events from 1380 to 1393—The probable site of Haemmerlein's house and his occupations—How the business of the town was carried on—The administration of justice—Ecclesiastical arrangements—The subsequent fortunes of Kempen.

THERE is often a peculiar interest in the birth-places of great and famous men quite independent of external surroundings. Be they on the bleak side of a barren moor away from the busy haunts of men, or in a back street of some country town, within the reach of many passers-by; or be they otherwise devoid of anything to make them remarkable or attractive, there is nevertheless in some breasts a feeling of singular regard to the spots where men of note were cradled and brought up. Some such feeling stirred within me and made me anxious to view the locality where the pious author of the 'De Imitatione Christi' had first seen the light, and where his childhood had been spent under the watchful guardianship of his pious parents. I wanted to see what the place and neighbourhood were like, and I wished also to ascertain whether any memorials or traditionary reminiscences of his early days were to be met with; whether there were any interesting annals belonging to the town worth recording; and especially whether I could learn anything of moment that transpired there during the time à Kempis was under his father's roof.

Accordingly, in the autumn of 1875 I went in company with a friend to visit the place. The town of Kempen is not difficult of access to the English traveller; for as he goes on his journey to the Continent by the new route *via* Queensborough and Flushing, and on through Holland and

Germany, he will pass it on his way. We had been staying a few days on our homeward journey at Cologne, and took it on our return. After travelling about forty miles from the city of the Three Kings, the train drew up at a small but neat railway station. There is nothing very attractive or striking in the appearance of Kempen or the neighbourhood—no picturesque beauty in its position or surroundings, or anything worthy of much attention. It presents indeed a comfortable, home-like, cleanly aspect, similar to many other country German towns. For some distance before reaching Kempen the country is flat and monotonous. The eye has no distant hills to rest upon; there is no varied landscape of wood and water to admire and gaze upon. The fields lie open to the road; there is hardly a stone wall to be seen, and only a hedge or two near the town. Here and there a row of trees may be noticed lining and pointing out the direction of the roads. Short posts or ditches are mostly used to mark the boundaries and divisions of property. The land is extensively divided into small patches, or more frequently strips, producing a variety of crops, which make the country, and especially as you near the town, more like a series of allotment gardens. Small farm-houses with their outbuildings, surrounded with their stacks of corn and hay, are dotted up and down, and in some cases sheltered by clumps of trees. The ground seems thoroughly well cultivated, and though the look-out is somewhat tame there is a sense of quiet repose, content, and prosperity about the neighbourhood which has a soothing effect. It was a beautiful autumnal afternoon; the remaining crops of the harvest had just been gathered in, the shadows were beginning to lengthen out, and a soft fragrant breeze was stirring; so it was not to be wondered at that the travellers should feel a pleasing and tranquillising influence steal over them as they drew near to their destination.

It has been observed that there is often—though we meet with notable exceptions from other causes—a congeniality between a man's birth-place and his future tastes and feelings. Some men of cultivated minds, born and



bred amid romantic scenery, have in after years displayed a keen enthusiasm and attachment for such beauties of nature, and when settled in other parts of the country that are somewhat uniform and unattractive have constantly a thirst and longing for more varied landscapes and revert to them with rapture. It was thus, it has been said, with Dr. Arnold, the great schoolmaster. Brought up amid charming scenery, it was one of the most delightful changes to him to get away from the somewhat regular and unattractive aspect of the lower Midland counties to the more picturesque scenery of the lakes and mountains of Westmoreland and Cumberland. Whereas, on the other hand, it frequently happens, though not always, that those who have been reared where there is nothing to attract the beholder, or to awaken the imagination, have rarely been moved by lovely views in the outward world, and do not seem fully to appreciate them. It may be that the faculties of the soul in this respect remain dormant unless they are awakened and early developed ; but be this as it may—and to what extent the observation is true we need not inquire—this allusion to the character of the country where Thomas à Kempis was born may serve to throw some light upon what is regarded by one or two authors as a serious blot in the books of the ‘*De Imitatione*.’

It is brought as a charge against this work that it is utterly devoid of any reference to the outward charms of nature, and that this fair and beautiful world which God has given us to enjoy, as well as to inhabit and pass our time in, is but scantily noticed ; and that consequently the religion that it inculcates is thereby somewhat of a narrow and gloomy character. Now, supposing that Thomas à Kempis be the author of this book, as there seems little doubt but that he is, may not this ignoring of what is lovely in the natural world, this seeming neglect in appreciating God’s beautiful earth, be owing in some measure to the circumstance that there was little or nothing in the surrounding country where he was born to call forth his admiration, and to train his mind in early life to a regard

and love for the world of nature ; and may not this to some degree account for our finding but little allusion in that book to the charms of the outward world? However this may be, it is a charge which can be brought against the other writings of à Kempis, for in this respect they are very similar to the 'De Imitatione.'

It is questionable, however, how far the love of nature is essential to true religion ; whether it is necessary for the renewal of the soul to direct its attention especially to the beauties of the external world ; and whether we ought to look for expressions of delight and admiration regarding lovely scenery in a book particularly designed for the cultivation of inward devotion. We acknowledge that the author of the 'De Imitatione' is so taken up with the things of God and the training of the immortal soul that he seems to have no mind for the things of earth, however beautiful they appear. But is he to be blamed for this? Is it to be considered a fault or blot in the book that there is found to be no turning aside to expatiate upon some enchanting view—no falling into raptures about the beauties of the natural world? I trow not. I think it much better that the author has kept steadily in view the greatness of his subject—the will of God and the welfare of a man's soul—how man can rise to a higher life on earth, and secure his salvation by doing the will of God, following in the steps of Christ his Lord, and loving Him, and trusting in Him with all his soul and strength. Nay, might we not be inclined to regard it as one of the peculiar characteristics of the book, for which it is to be more highly valued, that the mind of the reader is not for a moment turned aside from the all-important object before him—viz. the moulding of his imperishable soul into the likeness of the Perfect Man—by any of the attractive beauties of earth? The author would have those for whom he wrote to concentrate their minds and souls upon the 'one thing needful,' as if all other matters must be kept subordinate to this. And there is a value in this which must approve itself to thinking men ; for do not those who wish to attain success in any depart-

ment of life in the world give their undivided attention to the one thing they are aiming after, and will not be drawn aside to other matters, however engaging or of good report they may be? And it is the neglect of this—the being diverted from this single aim—as men well know—which causes so many to fail or come short in what they undertake.

This ‘marvellous self-absorption,’ which is accounted by one as ‘the worst defect of the “Imitatio,”’ because it has no words to dilate ‘on the stars of heaven’ or on ‘the flowers of spring,’ and will not give a thought to the ‘great voice of mountain or sea,’ is a charge which might equally as well be brought against the writings of St. Paul in the sacred volume. As an evidence of this we must take leave to quote the words of a beautiful writer, who thus alludes to the subject :—

‘The Tarsus in which St. Paul was born was very different from the dirty, squalid, and ruinous Mohammedan city which still bears the name and stands upon the site. The natural features of the city, indeed, remain unchanged ; the fertile plain still surrounds it ; the snowy mountains of the chain of Taurus still look down on it ; the bright swift stream of Cydnus still refreshes it. But with these scenes of beauty and majesty we are the less concerned, because they seem to have had no influence over the mind of the youthful Saul. We can well imagine how, in a nature differently constituted, they would have been like a continual inspiration ; how they would have melted into the very imagery of his thoughts ; how, again and again, in crowded cities and foul prisons, they would have

Flashed upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude.

With St. Paul—though he, too, is well aware that “the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly visible, being apprehended by the things that He hath made, even His eternal power and Divinity”—yet to him this was an indisputable axiom, not a conviction con-

stantly received with admiration and delight. There are few writers who, to judge solely from their writings, seem to have been less moved by the beauties of the external world. Though he had sailed again and again across the blue Mediterranean, and must have been familiar with the beauties of those isles of Greece

Where burning Sappho leved and sung,  
Where grew the arts of war and peace,  
Where Delos rose and Phoebus sprung ;

though he had again and again traversed the pine-clad gorges of the Asian hills, and seen Ida, and Olympus, and Parnassus in all their majesty ; though his life had been endangered in mountain torrents and stormy waves, and he must often have wandered as a child along the banks of his native stream, to see the place where it roars in cataracts over its rocky course—his soul was so entirely absorbed in the mighty moral and spiritual truths which it was his great mission to proclaim, that not by one verse, scarcely even by a single expression, in all his letters, does he indicate the faintest gleam of delight or wonder in the glories of nature. There is, indeed, an exquisite passage in his speech at Lystra on the goodness of “the living God, which made heaven and earth, and the sea and all things that are therein,” and “left not Himself without witness, in that He did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.” But in this case Barnabas had some share in the address, which even if it do not, as has been conjectured, refer to the fragment of some choral song, is yet in tone and substance directly analogous to passages of the Old Testament. And apart from this allusion I cannot find a single word which shows that Paul had even the smallest susceptibility for the works of nature. There are souls in which the burning heat of some transfusing purpose calcines every other thought, every other desire, every other admiration ; and St. Paul’s was one. His life was absorbingly, if not solely and exclusively, the spiritual life—the life which is utterly dead to every other interest of the growing and travelling



creation, the life hid with Christ in God. He sees the universe of God only as it is reflected in the heart and life of man.<sup>1</sup>

As it was thus with St. Paul, so it appears to have been with the author of the 'De Imitatione,' and therefore, instead of considering it to be one of the worst defects that appears in his writings, may it not be regarded as one of its peculiar excellencies? It may not approve itself to all alike, but it certainly has the sanction and example of an inspired apostle, who in his holy enthusiasm for the salvation of souls in making known the Divine Will, and in his zeal for bringing men into conformity to the likeness of Christ, is apparently oblivious to the beauties of nature.

I confess to a love of the beautiful; I feel an elevation of soul, indeed, when I contemplate the works of the Creator's hand; but, however desirable and profitable, I do not consider these feelings and sentiments essential to the welfare of the soul; the Christian may live and grow and excel in grace without them; and many a one will be found amid the glories of heaven who has had little or no taste for the splendid sceneries of earth.<sup>2</sup>

But leaving this question, I will proceed with our visit to Kempen. When we alighted at the station, the first thing that took our attention was the sweetness and purity of the atmosphere. Perhaps it was the striking contrast we felt between the close, stuffy atmosphere and noxious vapours of the city we had left behind to the light, invigorating air we breathed that made us exclaim, while our minds were full of à Kempis, 'What a healthy and

<sup>1</sup> Farrar, D.D., *The Life and Work of St. Paul*, i. 17-19.

<sup>2</sup> In the above-named work on St. Paul the writer, when speaking of what is called 'the sentimental love of nature' as a modern rather than an ancient feeling, gives the following words in a note, which shows that this deadness to the scenery of the outward world appears in other really earnest men: 'The reader will recall to mind the analogous cases of St. Bernard riding all day along the lake of Geneva, and asking in the evening where it was; of Calvin showing no trace of delight in the beauties of Switzerland; and of Whitfield, who seems not to have borrowed a single expression or illustration from his thirteen voyages across the Atlantic and his travels from Georgia to Boston' (p. 20).

bracing spot this is in which to rear a child !' Besides, at first sight there was a brightness and cheerfulness about the place that was refreshing. A few plain but neat residences lined the road as we passed on to the town, and numerous little well-kept gardens with fruits, flowers, and vegetables were to be seen, which gave a comfortable appearance. When we had proceeded half-way we perceived on the left hand, opposite to an angle of the road leading directly into the town, a large well-built structure, which was the gymnasium or public school. Here, as we afterwards learned, formerly stood the old castle of Kempen. Further on we saw a fine church ; then as we came more into the centre of the town the houses looked older, and were somewhat irregularly built, many of them being turned into shops, though the greater part still remain as private residences. Proceeding a little further, we came upon another church, which proved to be the site of the old parish church of Kempen. Our interest in it, however, was somewhat diminished when we found that there was little of the old structure left that had existed in *à* Kempis's day. It had been almost entirely rebuilt in a plain, substantial way, without much regard to architectural beauty. A part of the ancient building had, however, been left, and was pointed out to us, and to this we turned with some interest, for on the wall there appeared rather a good fresco, though somewhat faded, of a group of saints, and on this *à* Kempis must have gazed in his youthful days. Great care is taken of this spot, for a curtain is drawn across it to preserve the figures.

From this church it is but a little distance to the 'Stadhuis,' or small town-hall, where all the public affairs of the town are transacted and justice administered. It is a very plain building and stands out a little on one side of an irregular square, which is the market-place. We entered the building, however, to look at a large portrait of Thomas *à* Kempis which we heard was to be seen. It is hung up in the principal room. The venerable Canon of Mt. St. Agnes appears seated in his ecclesiastical vestments, and is

looking down, so that we do not get a sight of his eyes. The painting has rather a ruddy, Dutch-like character, and has little of the ascetic appearance about it that you might expect. In the corner the date of it, with the name of the painter, is set down ; viz. John M. Kersten, 1750. The picture, therefore, is a comparatively modern one, being executed nearly two hundred and eighty years after the death of à Kempis ; and if it was not copied from an old painting, it must be an imaginary one, as some other paintings of à Kempis evidently are. After seeing seven or eight different pictures of him, I have come to the conclusion that there are only two or three on which any dependence can be placed. The picture of à Kempis here is a proof, however, that the people of Kempen look upon this place as his native town.

Few vestiges of the old town as it was in à Kempis's time now remain, and it was in vain to search for the house where he had lived in his youth. Old and dilapidated as some few of the buildings appear to be, they have nearly all been built since that period ; and yet, as may be gathered from old records, the direction of the streets in the centre of the place is much as it was, since the old lines have been kept throughout many changes. But still the town in other ways is greatly altered. It is now open to the country on every side, but when à Kempis was a boy there it was surrounded by strong walls and protected by a moat. It had also four gates, each having two towers, leading to the four quarters of the town, which formed an irregular polygon ; and between the gates several watch-towers were placed for protection. For safety the city wind-mill was also placed within the walls.

But, to go back a little further still in the history of Kempen, anterior to the time of à Kempis, it is recorded that in the place where the town now stands was formerly a wood, stretching further to the north, over light dry ground ; and to the south of it there were boggy morasses, formed by the retreating bed of the Rhine. The wood

formed a boundary line to mark the division of territory. It afterwards fell into the hands of the Church of Cologne. Being an outlying district of that Church, a mission station was planted here when an advance was made upon heathenism. A place of worship was erected for the scattered inhabitants of the country, which eventually became the site for the ancient Church of St. Peter, near to which other houses were built, which formed the nucleus of the future town. It was not, however, until the time of Archbishop Siegfried v. Westerburg, who may be regarded as its real founder, that the town gained any importance. According to an old tradition, he built three towers to mark the limits of the town, and declared that whoever entered therein should enjoy the privileges of citizenship. On November 3, 1294, he drew up at Neuss three charters in favour of his new town.

In the first, which is in the form of a general patent, he promised to the burghers of Kempen, who were then busied with the arduous undertaking of completing the necessary works for its defence and the extension of its commerce, the same freedom and rights as he had given to Nerdingen and other towns belonging to the bishopric. The second document, which is addressed to the burgo-master, sheriffs, and all the officials of Kempen, encourages them to persevere in the fortification of the town, and empowers them to apply for this object all the revenues derived from taxes levied on the bakers, butchers, and other shopkeepers, as was done in Rheinberg and Nerdingen. In order also that the walls, gates, and towers, as well as the streets, ditches, and ramparts, might be finished, Archbishop Henry v. Virnenberg allowed a tax to be imposed for four years on all articles of food, especially meat and bread. Although the town and lands of Kempen were pledged for a time to Count Diethrich Luf. v. Hülfrath, yet the internal organisation was so actively developed that on Whit-Monday 1322 the burghers elected their representative council, and during the same year the Archbishop summoned them, together with



representatives of the lands, to attend a council at Neuss.<sup>1</sup>

From this date there is a regular and more explicit history of the town, which renders it possible for us to give a somewhat more definite account of its condition during the childhood of Thomas à Kempis. In the centre stood the citadel, and a fosse around it. There were probably two, if not three, fosses; for in the record it speaks of 'extremum fossatum,' and again of the 'medium fossatum.'<sup>2</sup> There was also an outer wall of some extent erected round the fortified walls of the town in the time of Archbishop Dietrich v. Mörs, which enclosed many waste places which were without houses, but were afterwards built upon, as is testified by the names of two streets having the appendage to them 'on the meadows.'

In the year Thomas was born, i.e. in May 1380, the foundations of the citadel were laid by Frederick v. Saarvenden and completed in four years under the direction of John Hundt, one of the burghers. This was deemed necessary both to restrain the burghers from following the example of other towns in rebelling against their lords, and further also to protect the town, as well as the tithe lands, from the hostile inroads of depredatory bands. Immediately after the citadel was finished, and during the first half of the fifteenth century, this fortified place was used as a prison for the knights and their retainers that were taken captive in the constantly recurring petty feuds of those times. The plundering expeditions of Count Engelbert IV. of Mark, a sort of freebooter, proved the great necessity there was of such a well fortified stronghold. To avenge the disgrace of the imprisonment of his brother Adolphus of Cleves, he came into the neighbourhood with his band of followers and committed

<sup>1</sup> See *Nachrichten über Thomas à Kempis, nebst einem Anhang von meistens noch ungedruckten Urkunden*, von J. Mooren, Pfarrer in Wachten-donk. Crefeld, 1855, pp. 14-17. See also copies of documents at the end of this book.

<sup>2</sup> Mooren, *Nachrichten ü. T. à K.* p. 17.

serious devastations. This was in the year 1392, when Thomas was about twelve years old. It was in the month of August, when the barns were full and the grapes were ripe for the vintage. He stopped about nine days, attacked various places in the surrounding country, and did much mischief. It was a regular plundering expedition; for he squeezed out of the people 10,000 goldens and 200 cart-loads of wine, besides carrying other things away with him. His appearance caused great consternation in Kempen, and every available citizen capable of bearing arms, among whom doubtless was the father of Thomas, stood prepared to make a good defence. Putting on, however, a bold front, and the place being well fortified, Engelbert hesitated to attack it, and finally drew off from the neighbourhood without making any assault upon the town; so that the people of Kempen got off with a fright, without being pillaged.<sup>1</sup>

The house where Thomas lived with his parents was near the old cemetery in the neighbourhood or precincts of the ancient Church of St. Peter. Though they were poor and had to labour diligently, as well as to use great economy, for their daily sustenance, there is every probability that the house they lived in was their own. In the register or archives of the town there is a record that in the year 1402 John, the elder son of John Hemerken, sold, on behalf of himself and his brother Thomas, their house at Kempen adjoining the cemetery. A certified copy of this record of the sale of the house is given by Pastor Mooren as attested by two witnesses or actuaries of Kempen.<sup>2</sup> We hear little or nothing of the father or

<sup>1</sup> Mooren, *Nachrichten ü T. à K.* p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> 'Anno 1402, Reverendus Pater Joannes Malleolus seu Hemerken Thomæ de Kempis germanus pro se et fratre suo Thoma ædes suas Kempenæ prope Cœmeterium sitas vendidit, uti hæc infra notata formalia, quæ ex Archivis Electoralis Judicii Civitatis et Satrapie Kempensis Archidioecesis Coloniensis inferioris in conspectu Clarissimorum D. D. Georgii Theodori Vasmer Prætoris et Joannis Henrici Molanus Judicii hujatis actuarii ac duorum scabinorum 7 ma die Mensis Martii 1744 fideliter desumpsi evidenter edocent hujus tenoris :—

‘ Herr Johann Hemerken, Priester Canönich von den Rugulieren, pro

mother of Thomas after he leaves Kempen, but we infer from the record alluded to above that at the time of its date they were both dead; and as the brothers were living together in the new, but small and very poor Monastery of Mount St. Agnes, near Zwolle, neither of them had need of the house; and as, moreover, by the vow of poverty neither of them could retain possession of it, however small the value, they had evidently determined to sell it, and give away the proceeds to some charitable object—most likely to supply the necessities of their own monastery, which was very much in want of support.

We are told that the father of Thomas à Kempis cultivated a small farm, and at the same time followed the trade of an artisan. Whether he cultivated the farm on his own account or as a labourer is somewhat uncertain. It was formerly the custom for the more wealthy owners to hire labourers to till small portions of their land, and to take the produce; and it is probable that the father of Thomas was one of those thus employed; most likely he took this work to fill up his time and eke out a livelihood, for which his craft did not suffice. Old Hemerken's trade is thought to have been that of a worker in gold and silver, or a maker of belts. Either of these trades would require the use of a hammer; and some suggest that from the use of this, either by himself or his forefathers, he obtained the surname that he bore. Such tradesmen were always found near to some well-attended church, in order that the clergy and pious worshippers might be able to buy little articles for gifts and offerings; and Mooren observes that this supposition seems the more likely to be correct as Thomas himself so accurately and artistically describes the crown of St. Agnes in one of his sermons to novices (iii. 8, sec. 4).<sup>1</sup> Though this is to some extent a conjecture, it seems certain that the father of Thomas was engaged in some such like

se et Thoma suo fratre vendidit et transportavit domum suam gelegen zu Kempen ahm Kirchhoff negst Telen ter Meer haus, 1402 fer. 3 post Lam. berti.'—*Nachrichten*, p. 233.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.* ch. ii. p. 32.

employment. And though Thomas was early inclined to learning, and was much encouraged in it, yet was he not allowed to spend all his time thus, but was required to help his father in both the field and the workshop, so that he became inured to manual labour betimes, and was not suffered to spend his leisure in idleness. The gardens of the town are also often mentioned in the ancient records, and as most of the burghers possessed a plot, it is probable that the father of Thomas had one of them, to which in spare moments he would resort with his son. These small details help to give us some idea how the youth time of Thomas was spent; learning in his tender years to be useful to others—to be always employed in some profitable work, even whilst he kept his mind exercised, and attended to the duties of religion with all his heart and soul.

The condition of affairs and the manner in which they were carried on at Kempen during the boyhood of Thomas à Kempis may be gathered from several circumstances, and historical events which are recorded. The government of the town was carried on by two burgomasters, who with the city councillors formed a corporate body for the management of all affairs connected with the interests of the citizens. One of the burgomasters was elected by the council from among its members, and was called the council burgomaster. The other was elected every year in Christmas week, by the town representatives, as their leader. He was called the communal burgomaster. Ex-burgomasters remained as members of the council. When the council resolved on undertaking any matter, the burgomasters were deputed to have it carried out, and the representatives of the people held a supervision over it, gave advice, and suggested alterations and improvements.

In all legal matters the town and the country formed one community, and had only one court of justice. Justice was administered in the court house, or *Stadhuis*, as it is called, between the church and the market-place. The Archbishop of Cologne was the nominal head of the magistracy, but he usually delegated the discharge of its



functions to an official. When Thomas first saw the light of day, this post was filled by the knight Engelbert von Orsbeck, who became the real ruler of the city. The sittings of the court were often held beneath the luxuriant walnut tree in the private grounds of the Archbishop. There were various guilds of tradesmen, who held the sway in their several kinds of business. Such were the guilds of the smiths, the carpenters, and the bakers. The consumption of meat at one time became so considerable that the 'flesh bank' was raised to the rank of a royal corporation.

The appearance of the church at Kempen, which then existed, and to which Thomas was wont to go with his parents—as represented on an old civic seal—was somewhat heavy, and of Romanesque architecture. There was a square tower, surmounted by a low conical roof which rose above the rest of the building on the north side; on one side of the church roof there were two wide windows, and beneath them there was an entrance, and on the other side of the church there were four windows and another entrance. Besides the high altar, there were several others which had been added from time to time. There was one dedicated to St. Mary, another to St. Catharine, another to St. George, and a fourth to St. Nicholas. The clergy house, with all its buildings, was close to the church, and had been erected in A.D. 1337 by means of the liberal bequests of Gotifried Kessel, or Kettel—a rich childless old knight. The clergy that served the several altars had to assist their superior, the rector, not only in the services of the church, but also in the cure of souls. And when they wished to take the Holy Sacrament to the sick and dying in the country they were provided with a horse.

The parishes of Oldt, Hüls, and Vorst originally belonged to Kempen; they however had chapels of ease, and were possessed of rectors, who enjoyed certain distinct privileges. A complete parochial system seems to have been established, only so far restricted that these rectors could not consecrate, and were obliged to attend with the candidates for holy orders at the parochial synod at

Kempen. The synodical judicature, before which all cases of public offence or scandal in the church were tried, and punishment awarded, held its sittings every Thursday at midday in the parish church, the rector being president. There were at that time no regular monasteries in Kempen, only a few isolated attempts at fraternal bodies. The Carmelite Fathers had a residence in the precincts of the church, and the Dominicans in the Neu Strasse. The Cistercians and the Benedictines had also settled in Kempen. The post of sacristan was considered an office of some importance in Kempen; and after the death of John von Lint the Archbishop commanded that it should be bestowed upon John Hundt, one of the first burghers in Kempen, and the builder of the citadel, which was commenced and completed whilst Kempis was living there as a boy.

Like other towns of smaller or greater importance, Kempen then possessed its public school. From the old chronicles we learn that on every anniversary of the dedication of the Altar of St. Catharine, it was decreed that the altarist of the same should give a feast, to which he had to invite the rector, his fellow altarists, and the schoolmaster.

In 1371 a certain Theodorus is mentioned as *Clericus Rector Scholarium*: the following year, however, he was appointed rector of the altar dedicated to the Virgin, and we hear no more of his scholastic labours. At the synodical judicature for 1392, just before Thomas left Kempen, the name of Henricus appears as *Rector Scholarium*, and he was doubtless for a time the preceptor of Thomas; and it is probable that one Jacob Welinch might have also, in some degree, had this honour.

It would be interesting to learn more respecting the history of these partly clerical and partly secular schools; but, without searching into details, it may be sufficient to know that, as far as it can be ascertained concerning the foundation schools of those times, they were principally designed to train young boys as choristers; in addition to which the greatest attention was paid to reading Latin

well, and to a cursory knowledge of the language, together with a little writing and the learning by heart a few prayers and Church hymns. As the services of the church were in Latin, this kind of instruction was needed for the choristers. The school teachers in those days were taken from the rich burgher families in Kempen, most of them having received deacon's orders, while some of them were married men.

That Thomas attended the school of his native town is evident from his speaking of Gobelin as his schoolfellow at this place.<sup>1</sup> His parents' house was situated in the close near to the school, which was not far from the church; and his reverent spirit even in childhood drew him to the services of the church, and gave him an ardent desire to learn what was necessary to enable him to join in them. Both these circumstances point towards his attending the town school. Moreover, unless he had received some preparatory instruction there, which caused the bent of his mind and of his future ability to be manifest, his parents would scarcely have formed the resolution to send him to the higher school at Deventer. And had he been utterly ignorant of the rudiments of learning, he would most likely have confessed it in the account he gives of what he learnt while under the care of Florentius.

It comes within the compass of the time when Thomas was still at Kempen to note, in passing, a significant fact, which shows that it was not without its learned men. Among the thirteen doctors of the Sorbonne who opened the newly established University of Cologne on the fête day of the Three Kings, A.D. 1389, and delivered lectures, one of them came from Kempen. His name was Alexander de Kempena; but little is said about him further than that he belonged to a preaching order. Another notable circumstance worthy of being recorded is, that the plague which caused such fearful devastation in the surrounding

<sup>1</sup> 'Qui cum eo in patria scholas visitaverat . . . vobis cum cœvulis in cœmeterio more scholarium ludentibus.'—Rosweid. *Vind. Kemp. Vita Gobelini*, p. 123.

country in the fourteenth century entirely spared Kempen. Notwithstanding their escape, however, from the pestilence, which should have caused them to be the more merciful towards others, the citizens rose up against the Jews. From this it is evident that there was a Jewish community in the town of Kempen, as appears also from one of the streets being called after them. In various parts of the country the Jews had dreaded the coming of a storm which was gathering against them. From a chronicle dated as far back as September 1347 we learn that many of them had taken flight. But years afterwards some of those who remained in Kempen were accused of having forged the sheriff's seal, in order to spread false reports, so as to make gain out of the citizens; and for this—whether true or not—two of their number were seized and burned to death in the meadows outside the town. And from other old chronicles it would appear that the Jews were eventually altogether expelled from Kempen.

There is some probability also that a little attention was given to the fine arts in Kempen, especially to painting. We know that Thomas à Kempis's elder brother John was very expert in illuminating missals with miniatures. Moreover a fellow townsman whom the latter admitted to the Monastery of Mount St. Agnes before Thomas came there, not only understood this art, but also painted beautiful pictures of the saints for the high altar of the chapel. But whether they learnt their art at Kempen itself is uncertain. It must be remembered, however, that towards the close of the fourteenth century the schools of art at Cologne had reached a high state of proficiency.

There were charitable people living in those days also in Kempen. During the childhood of à Kempis one of the most important and useful institutions of his native town was founded. A rich burgher named John von Bruchhusen gave up his own house in the market-place, together with other adjacent buildings belonging to him, for the erection of a hospital, which he richly endowed. There was a poor-house also, where the indigent and infirm



were received and cared for ; while from another institution other poor people were supported by alms, given to them in the church every Monday. Some years afterwards alms were given on Fridays also.

We find no intimation in the old records that the father of à Kempis took any share in the government of the town, or in the dispensing of alms or clothing to the poor. This seems to corroborate the statement that he belonged to the poorer classes ; for though he might not seek alms for himself or his family, he was one of those who were not called upon to take a prominent part in town matters, and preferred remaining unnoticed. It was impossible, however, for him to avoid taking his share in the sittings of the people or lower burghers ; nor could he escape taking part in the armed defence of the town when occasion required, for every able-bodied man was in request in such emergencies. He was necessarily concerned in all the measures and movements astir and fostered for the prosperity, protection, and well-being of the community ; and though his name does not occur in relation to any of these things, they were matters of such interest that they would more or less form the subject of conversation in the humble household of John Haemmerlein when Thomas, his son, was present.<sup>1</sup>

Having given some particulars of the origin of Kempen, and various annals of the town, which relate chiefly to the period when Thomas lived under his father's roof, I do not feel warranted to enter at any length upon the subsequent history of the place. A few sentences may therefore suffice to put the reader in possession of its future history. It was subject to many sad changes, chiefly those of war. It shared in the troubles of the Thirty Years' War. In the year 1641 hostilities had commenced in the Archbishopric of

<sup>1</sup> Many of these particulars are drawn from Mooren's *Nachrichten über Thomas à Kempis*. From what we learn, he was well qualified to give such information. He is in error, however, when he states as a remarkable fact, that Thomas à Kempis saw the light the same year that Tauler was taken from it ; since it is generally acknowledged that the latter died in the year 1361, while Thomas à Kempis was not born before 1380 or 1379.

Cologne, on the part of the French and their hired Hessian and Weimar troops under General Guebriant. After the taking of Nerdingen, Jan. 14, 1642, the battle of Hückelsmey took place, on the border between St. Tönis and Crefeld. Those engaged were the allies already mentioned and the Imperial troops under General Lambris, ending in the defeat of the latter. The news of defeat spread dismay throughout the country, and the Elector was greatly disturbed. After the burning of Grefruth, the enemy's vanguard arrived at Kempen on January 21, which in prospect of war had resisted the proposals to make stronger fortifications and have an increased garrison; therefore both burgomasters were taken to Cologne and forced to pay a fine of one thousand Reichsthalers.

When besieged by the enemy a heavy fire was directed on the town between the Peter, Ellen, and the Kirk Gates, and on the eighth day the enemy's artillery succeeded in penetrating a great tower in the vicinity of the Ellen Gate, by which nearly the whole of the Ellen Street was destroyed. Altogether three hundred and seventy-five cannon-balls entered the town. Seeing no chance of holding out, the burgomasters consented to capitulate, and signed the deed of surrender at the Cow Gate. The commandant, who had very bravely defended the town with a force of three hundred and fifty men, would not agree to the capitulation, withdrew to the northern end of the fortifications, and finally took refuge in the castle itself, but was obliged at last to yield to the superior numbers of the enemy. Through the intervention of the King of France Kempen was handed over to the Hollanders, who only held it one year, treating the inhabitants very badly; and in 1643 the Hessians came again. Kempen sustained two more severe sieges in 1671 and 1672. Other changes followed, and eventually its walls were demolished, and the town sunk to a very low ebb. It has, however, gradually revived of late years, and is now a thriving place.

Such are some of the particulars of interest regarding the town which was the birth-place of the celebrated

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author of the 'De Imitatione Christi' and from which he took his name; and it is through him, and the veneration and esteem in which his memory is held throughout the whole of Christendom, that the town of Kempen has been rendered famous.

When à Kempis was about thirteen years old he had to leave Kempen to pursue his studies elsewhere. In another chapter we shall follow him to his future destination.

## CHAPTER IV.

A Kempis proceeds to Deventer—A description of the town as it is at present and as it formerly existed—A Kempis finds his brother at Windesheim—Recommended by him to Florentius, who kindly receives him—Eventually lodges with a godly matron—A Kempis attends the Great School—Some Account of Boheme the Master, and his friendship with Florentius—A school of a similar kind at Zwolle under John Cele—The character and discipline of these schools—An account of John Cele by à Kempis—A Kempis received among the Brothers of Common Life—His admiration of the members of this society—Their chief occupation in transcribing books—Some idea of the constitution and arrangements of the Society.

JOHN HAEMMERLEIN the elder, and his wife, having carefully and affectionately trained and brought up their son Thomas to walk in the ways of holy obedience, now determined to send him to Deventer, that he might be further perfected in his education, and probably with the hope that he might eventually be enabled to enter the ministry of the Church and serve God in such a holy calling. At that time there was a celebrated Public School in this place, and students came thither from all parts of Holland and from other distant countries. There was also in the same town the newly constituted Society of the Brothers of Common Life, to which allusion has been already made, and was then in great repute, which fostered the religious life, and gladly held out a helping hand to earnest-minded young men who were needy and unable wholly to support themselves, but who showed some ability for learning. Besides providing them with the shelter of a pious home where they would be faithfully and lovingly tended, and incited to a life of holiness and virtue, they afforded them some means of subsistence, and to some extent provided payment for their instruction whilst studying at the Public School; holding out to them, at the same time, the prospect of finding



them some suitable employment, whereby they might permanently support themselves. The Public School at Deventer, and the Community of the Brothers, though separate institutions and wholly independent of each other, were brought into close contact, and rendered the one to the other most essential service in carrying out the designs each had in hand. Some of the Brothers especially qualified for the work would assist in teaching the youths of the school, and encourage them in good ways; and while some of the scholars who showed signs of piety and ability were to a certain extent assisted by them, the schools in turn furnished the Brotherhood with new and youthful members to be instructed in their own zealous ways of religion and to be taken into their fellowship; many of whom afterwards wrought much good and became ornaments of the Society.

Thomas's elder brother John had been sent to Deventer some years before to receive instruction at the school, and had met with much help and encouragement from the Brothers. The good reports that his parents had received of him from time to time were very satisfactory, and showed that he not only had made great advance in learning, but that he was in great favour with the Superior and the other Brothers. He had already been admitted as a member of the Society, and was now in a position not only to support himself, but to instruct others—if he did not even in some degree contribute to the support of the poorer scholars in the school. What better course, then, or one more likely to conduce to the advancement of Thomas, their other son, in every way that they might desire, could his parents take than to send him to the same school at Deventer, since there was a prospect that he might receive some support or encouragement from his brother, if not directly at first from the 'Brothers of Common Life'? It is probable that John à Kempis, as he was called, had urged his parents to send his younger brother to this place, or that there was some understanding that he should come when old enough.

It is evident, however, from what afterwards transpired,

that there had been no recent communication between them about this matter. The means for corresponding between distant towns were difficult and uncertain in those days, and his parents were ignorant of the change John had been induced to make when they sent their younger son away. But another reason is given why they were further encouraged to send their son to this place, viz. the excellent accounts they had heard of the kindness, learning, and piety of Florentius, who was at the head of the 'Brothers of Common Life.'

We can better imagine than describe the feelings of both the parents and their son at parting. The lad had now arrived at a most interesting age, and had doubtless been a great comfort and delight to both his father and mother. They had watched over him from his very cradle, they had endeavoured as far as in them lay to instil into his mind sound principles of a truly religious life, and they had seen him grow up under their eyes with a youthful ardour for the things of God rarely witnessed. How, then, could they help doubly loving him, and consequently feel the more in parting with him? Nevertheless it was no doubt cheerfully done. Other parents were willing to part with their children for some hope of worldly advancement. Why should they not freely give up their son Thomas, and even speed his going from them, when in all likelihood it would promote his growth in grace, as well as enable him to gain higher qualifications for a life of devotion in God's service? And who can wonder that, though the youthful Thomas should grieve for awhile at leaving his beloved parents, he should yet, like a young athlete, be eager to try what he could do—what his powers were—eager to see and join his brother, and to prove himself worthy of the hopes his parents entertained for him?

There were two ways in which Thomas might go to Deventer—one by the road, from village to village, and so on to the place; or he might go to the Rhine, and take some boat going northward as far as Arnheim—but either way the journey would occupy him some days.

I, however, took a much easier route than either of these when I left Kempen for Deventer—that is, by the railway—staying all night at the beautiful town of Arnheim, on the banks of the Rhine. On my way to Deventer next day I passed through the town of Zutphen, which, as we shall see presently, furnished some worthy members to ‘the Brothers of Common Life.’

Deventer, to which Thomas bent his steps, is the chief city of Overijssel, in the lower Netherlands, in the Diocese of Utrecht, and is about twenty-six miles from Arnheim and sixty from Amsterdam. As Deventer is the place where a few of the most important years of Thomas à Kempis were spent, as well as the centre from whence sprang a great religious movement, about a hundred and fifty years before the Reformation, I shall give some further account of it here.

The whole of the district which is now called the kingdom of Holland belonged at that time, and for many years afterwards, to the German Empire. The most powerful prince of the country was the Bishop of Utrecht, and among his vassals he numbered the Counts of Holland, Gelder, and Cleves. The political state of the lower Netherlands during the fifteenth century was on the whole an unhappy one. The several provinces of Holland, Utrecht, Gelderland, Overijssel, and Friesland were incessantly disturbed by violent internal quarrels. Only a few burgher cities succeeded in keeping themselves free from party strife. Following the example of those living in the southern provinces of Brabant and Flanders, they devoted themselves more exclusively to promoting their shipping interests, their commerce, and their weaving, and gave less heed to political disturbances. Deventer, Zwolle, and Kampen, the principal towns in Overijssel, were among the number; and this raised them to such an unusual position of prosperity that they soon outstripped their neighbours in riches, territory, and power.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mooren, *Nachrichten über T. à K.* pp. 35, 36.

The country round Deventer is like that of Kempen, flat and uninteresting: you can see but a small portion even of the town as you approach it by the train. It is a much finer place, however, and of more importance at the present than Kempen, since it has several good streets, having capital shops in them, and other well-built streets with private houses. There are moreover four squares or open places; and in the centre of one of them is the great Cathedral Church called St. Lebuin, with its large massive tower. It is a fine edifice, in the Gothic style, and was built A.D. 1040, and consequently was in existence when Thomas went to Deventer. It is now used as a Protestant church, though previous to the Reformation it was, of course, in the hands of the Roman Catholics. The people, however, greatly incensed at the irregularities which then prevailed in that Church, and at the want of sympathy and interest exhibited for the welfare of their souls, and feeling that they had a greater right to their own place of worship, over and above that of the adherents to a foreign Church, were induced to make the change they desired. The reform here and in other parts of the country was, however, unhappily, not carried out in accordance with ancient Catholic principles, or with such regularity as in the Church of England at the Reformation. The tall pillars in the interior of the church ascend to a finely vaulted roof, and give the whole building a most spacious appearance. It is, however, whitewashed throughout, if we except the pulpit—which is in the centre on one side, having the pews facing round it in front—and parts of the organ. The Hollanders seem to have an innate love for white. Is it because it is an emblem of purity? Perhaps more likely because it gives a sense of cleanliness. It has, however, a cold appearance in comparison of many of the Roman Catholic churches, which give a better idea of holy worship, and are not so excessively decked out, or so offensive in other respects to the eyes of the Anglo-Catholic, as some of the churches in Belgium and other parts of the Continent.



When I visited the place in 1875 I should have found some difficulty in prosecuting my inquiries had it not been for the kind help, and directions to sources of information, which I received from Dr. L. A. Burgersdyke, the headmaster of the Public School there ; the Rev. Dr. Junius, one of the preachers at the Collegiate Church ; and Dr. von Eyk, the librarian of the 'Bibliotheke.' The memorials of Thomas à Kempis, or of 'the Brothers of Common Life,' are, however, necessarily few. The site of the old school was pointed out to me,<sup>1</sup> and part of the old wall which still remains ; the rest of it is entirely new, and the building wholly different in its arrangements. It is satisfactory to find, however, notwithstanding the changes time has wrought—and they have been many in that country—that on the very site of the schools where Thomas perfected his education there is still an excellent Public School. The Brother-house, which was built after Thomas left Deventer, chiefly by money one of his friends bequeathed, has entirely disappeared. The site of the chapel formerly belonging to the Brothers is now occupied by a Roman Catholic church, in part of which some of the old walls may be yet seen. The curé was absent, so I was unfortunate in not gaining more information, such as I expected to do in this quarter. The house in which Father Florentius lived was near this, for the garden where he used to walk with Thomas and the other members of the Brotherhood must have been at the back of this church, looking towards the spot where the railway station now stands, but bounded by the stream which runs between. In the 'Bibliotheke,' which is on the upper floor of the Hôtel de Ville, we found a fine old MS. psalter, with several other manuscript books which had formerly belonged to 'the Brothers of Common Life.' But, singularly enough, the library did not contain a single manuscript copy of the 'De Imitatione Christi,' or any other manuscript written by the hand of Thomas à Kempis. A thriving trade is here carried

<sup>1</sup> Here Erasmus was also taught, many years after Thomas left the place.

on ; several manufactories of various articles exist, some of which are aided by the steam engine. The place is noted also for a kind of spice bread, which is made in large quantities. Upwards of 400,000 loaves of the ordinary quality are annually turned out, in addition to the large number of a finer sort, which are exported to the East and West Indies. There are several pleasant walks along the banks of the river Yssel and in the neighbourhood, the principal one being the Worp, where in fine weather the band of the National Guard plays many lively airs.<sup>1</sup>

When Thomas entered the city it presented a somewhat different appearance to what it does now, being then also a fortified place. From an old plan of the city wherein you obtain a bird's-eye view of it, as it then was, it is seen, that in addition to the walls of the city, with its five large gateways, it had an outer wall for defence, with watch towers at regular distances. The river Yssel flowed close by on one side, and a deep moat or fosse went nearly all round the remainder of the walls. On the north-west side the outer wall and the fosse took an extra circuit and enclosed ten wind-mills for the use of the citizens. The very year that Thomas went to take his place in the Public School the country was in a state of great excitement. The Prince-Bishop of Utrecht had died, Florentius van Wevelinghoven, a man who had been much connected with the beginnings of the new religious movement that had taken place, and was very anxious for the welfare of souls, but not distinguished for his learning. It is recorded of him that such was his ardour in prayer, that it at times exposed him to the ridicule of his clergy ; but upon being made acquainted with this his only reply was, 'What wonder is it that, seeing I have many sheep, I should make many prayers?'<sup>2</sup> But scarcely had he passed away from his earthly career than the Count of Holland and Zeeland—Albert von Bayern—and William, Duke of Gelder and Jülich, marched against Utrecht with considerable forces, both of

<sup>1</sup> P. Plantenga, *La Hollande*, pp. 103, 104.

<sup>2</sup> Neale's *Jansenist Church*, p. 76.

them desiring to fill the vacant see with a nominee of their own.

The candidate supported by Albert was Roger von Bronkhorst, a cathedral dignitary of Cologne. Duke William, however, wished to appoint Frederick von Blankenheim, Bishop of Strasbourg. Upon this a keen strife ensued between the electing clergy as to which of the candidates should be chosen to be the Bishop. Each of them had a party that warmly supported their claims. At length Frederick von Blankenheim received his authority from Pope Boniface IX. to fill the vacant see. After he had entered upon his episcopal duties, he is reported to have exercised a firm, but still a beneficial rule for thirty years. Clothed with temporal power as well as spiritual authority, he conquered the Frieslanders, subdued the province of Drenthe, and crushed a revolt in his own capital which threatened to become dangerous. The Chroniclers of the Monasteries of Windesheim and of Mount St. Agnes—that of the latter being Thomas himself—speak most highly in praise of Bishop Frederick von Blankenheim. They call him ‘the father of the Land,’ ‘a pillar of the Church,’ ‘a protector of all good men,’ and ‘his reign as the golden age.’ Beneath his fostering care his subjects enjoyed peace and quietness; many monasteries were founded, and the schools of Deventer and Zwolle, meeting with his support and approval, flourished greatly. His last words on his death-bed, that he would be sorely missed, were indeed verified. He died on the 9th October, 1423, at his castle of Horst.<sup>1</sup>

Having arrived in the city, the first thing Thomas had to do was to inquire for his brother John: great however must have been his disappointment to find that he had left the place, and was not likely to return. Here was a difficulty which Thomas had not counted upon, and he was in some perplexity what to do. A new institution, according to the express wish of their patron, Gerard Groote, had been lately founded, of Canons Regular, of the Order of St.

<sup>1</sup> Mooren's *Nachrichten über T. à K.* p. 36.

Augustine, by the Brothers of Common Life, at Windesheim, an account of which will be given later on ; and Thomas's brother had been chosen to be one of the six first Canons, and had consequently gone to live there. Should Thomas proceed further, and endeavour to see his brother, and act upon his advice ; or should he make himself known to some of the fraternity among whom his brother had lately been living, and trust at once to their kindness ? Not only did he need some direction about pursuing his studies at Deventer, but what he had to consider at once was how he should maintain himself at the first ; for, since his parents could give him but small temporary help, he had little or nothing to live upon. This was, however, no discouragement to him, for he was fully persuaded in his mind that in some way or other he should be sufficiently provided for, since, in addition to the advice of his parents, he was conscious that his design in coming here was sincere and upright before God, and that He would not forsake him in the hour of his need. After some little consideration, he appears to have acted on the former suggestion, as the place could be reached in less than a day ; so after a little rest and refreshment he again started off to seek his brother.

The religious Society founded at Windesheim, where Thomas went in search of his brother, as it was the first monastery of the Canons Regular founded by ' the Brothers,' so afterwards it became the centre of numerous other like institutions, or monasteries which sprung from it, and was the place where the Chapters of the Canons Regular belonging to them were wont to meet annually—representatives from the various Houses, near at hand, and in distant parts, being sent there. John à Kempis, as he was called, was at this time about twenty-eight, and consequently about fifteen years older than his brother, whom he had probably never seen. When Thomas, then, had found him out, and made himself known, the new and youthful canon of Windesheim was agreeably surprised, and gazed upon his brother with no small delight and interest ; and there is



every reason, from what is said, to believe that he gave him a warm and affectionate greeting.

Loving inquiries had to be made first about the old people at home, their beloved parents ; then Thomas acquainted his brother with the object of his visit, and that it was by his father's advice and direction he had come to him. John, wishful to know more of his brother's mind and disposition, entered into loving and fraternal intercourse with him, and soon found that the earnest desire of his heart was to devote himself to God's service. John himself was deeply imbued with the love of God and the desire to spend his life in the service of Christ, and it much rejoiced his heart to see his younger, and probably only brother, coming forward and presenting himself as a young recruit in the noble army of Christ's soldiers. With deep interest he listened to all the pious youth had to say ; he entered keenly into the project for furthering his education at the public school of Deventer ; he greatly encouraged him to persevere in the course of life that he had in view, and which had been marked out for him ; and promised to render him what assistance he could.

Such a meeting of such brothers must have been touchingly sweet and sacred ; much had they to say to each other ; the elder one telling the younger how he might hope to succeed, and what kind of a life he would have to live, as well as assuring him of the blessedness of pursuing and embracing a life given to God with his whole heart : it may be that he held out to him the hope that they might one day live and labour together in the same monastery—which indeed afterwards came to pass—and be able to strengthen each other by devout intercourse and loving fellowship. Be this as it may, when Thomas took leave of his brother to return to Deventer, the latter gave him a letter of introduction to Florentius, the Rector or Superior of 'the Brothers of Common Life,' warmly commending his brother to his care and regard.

Arriving again at Deventer, with a heart the more inflamed with devout affections through the loving intercourse

he had held with his brother, Thomas went and knocked at the door of the house where Florentius lived, and upon being ushered into his presence presented his letter of introduction.

Florentius was still in the prime of life, but pale and of a thoughtful countenance, enfeebled through ill health, and of a delicate frame. He was clothed in a long garment of ordinary coarse grey cloth, which reached down to his ankles, with a belt round his waist. Florentius seems to have received Thomas very kindly and compassionately; and being possessed of a keen insight into character, took a particular liking to the youth from the first. It may be that he was partly prepossessed in his favour through the recommendation of his brother, who was held in high esteem among them, and with the hope that another youth from the same pious home at Kempen might eventually prove a valuable accession to their community; but there was a peculiarly modest, devout, and quiet demeanour about the lad which especially seized the fancy of Florentius; and without any hesitation he took Thomas into his care, and provided a temporary accommodation for him in his own house; he had him to his table with the rest of the Brothers living with him, got him placed in the school, and supplied him with necessary books. This enabled Florentius also to gain a greater insight into the opening character of Thomas, to personally direct his studies at the beginning, and to give him some useful and earnest counsel in pursuing his academical course.

Here he came at once, just for awhile at the first, into the very bosom of the religious Society of what was termed 'the Modern Devotion.' Here he saw reverend and pious men, some older than their Superior, but all paying due deference to him, some younger of saintly appearance, but all clothed alike; some few, however, wore their garments down only to the middle of the leg; these were the lay members of the little community; the others were ordinarily called Clerks (clerics) or Fathers. From most of them he received a kind word, and one or two took special notice of him.

This doubtless was to some extent for his brother's sake, who had lived in close communion with them ; so it made Thomas feel at home as it were, and truly thankful. Being brought into daily contact with the Superior, and with these other men, eminent for their piety and learning, he had frequent opportunities of listening to their discourse, and observing their habits and ways of life, which failed not greatly to impress him, and made him ambitious to become like them. It made him eager to begin his studies in earnest, and filled him with the pious resolution to seize every opportunity he should have of fitting himself right well for future usefulness in the service of God.

His stay in the house of Florentius, however, was necessarily not of long continuance. After awhile the Superior obtained a lodging for him in the house of a pious and benevolent lady, where he was sheltered and maintained with several other students ; Florentius still watching over him with fatherly interest. This is one of the few portions of his life about which Thomas himself speaks ; it is briefly given, and we shall let him tell his own story. He is led to do this incidentally, in a sort of introduction to some short sketches which he gives of several of the first members of the Congregation of the Brothers at Deventer.

‘When I came to Deventer,’ he says, ‘for the sake of prosecuting my studies in the years of my youth, I inquired the way I should take to the Canons Regular at Windesheim. And having there found my brother, living with the said Canons, I was induced by his counsel and encouragement to apply to that most reverend of men, Master Florentius, a vicar of the church of Deventer and a devout priest, the sweet fragrance of whose fame had already reached the upper provinces (that is, of Germany at that time) and already had inspired me with a reverential love of him ; since I frequently heard a great number of students speak well of him, and of the excellency of his instructions in divine things. Everyone who saw him or heard him acknowledged him to be a truly religious man ; for in the eyes of all men he was full of grace, being a true worshipper of God, and a most devout reverencer of our holy mother, the Church. When I came, therefore, into the presence of this reverend Father, he, being at once moved with pity towards me, kept me for some little time with him in his own

house, and there he prepared and instructed me for the schools, giving me, moreover, such books as he thought I might stand in need of. Afterwards he obtained a hospitable reception for me into the house of a certain honourable and devout matron, who showed much kindness both to me and to several other clerks.' <sup>1</sup>

Thomas very frequently, as it will be seen, mentions the names of those who had befriended him, or had done in any wise some good service to the Brotherhood to which he belonged, but, singularly enough, he does not place on record the name of his generous benefactress ; we can only hazard a conjecture as to who this noble lady was. Delprat considers it probable that she was the same lady who in 1391 graciously made Father Florentius exchange his little house in a narrow street for her large one in Pontsteegel Street—she taking the smaller one which he vacated. This lady's name, which deserves to be had in honour, was Zwerdera ; she was the widow of a knight, called John of Runen.

And now that Thomas's bodily wants were cared for, and he had a truly loving and motherly woman to watch over his temporal welfare, he applied himself with diligence to his studies, and regularly attended the Public School at Deventer. Encouraged and directed by Florentius, he strove to make progress in his learning, not only for its own sake, but also to prove that he was not ungrateful for the loving affection he received. This led to the greater development of his mental faculties, and a scrupulous endeavour to do everything well that he set his hand to, the good effects of which remained with him all through life.

During the first years when he attended the school for instruction at Deventer, John Boheme was the rector, and by Thomas's account of him he was a rigid disciplinarian, and exercised a strict government over the youths under his charge. He was an intimate friend of Florentius, and greatly admired him ; he frequently heard him preach, and showed much kindness to those in whom Florentius took an interest. Thomas relates an instance of this as regards him-

<sup>1</sup> Thom. à Kemp., *Vitæ Discipulorum Domini Florentii*, ch. i. § 2.



self. At the end of the course Thomas appeared before the master, and offered to pay the school fees, as the rest of the students did—Florentius having provided him with money for this purpose, that he might not be burdensome or beholden to anyone. But here it is better that Thomas should continue the tale in his own way, for it is one of lovely simplicity and generous sympathy.

‘I, among the rest,’ he says, ‘gave him what was owing, and asked for the book which I had left with him as a pledge. As he knew me, and was aware that I was under the care of Master Florentius, he said to me, “Who gave thee the money?” I replied, “My Father Florentius.” Then saith he, “Go, carry back to him his money, for out of love to him I will receive nothing from thee.” I therefore returned the money to Father Florentius, and said to him, “Out of love to thee, my master has given me back the school money.” “Thank him,” he answered; and said, “For the future I shall endeavour to reward him with more precious gifts.”’<sup>1</sup>

The money was doubtless not very great, but, partly to express his gratitude to them both, Thomas thus relates the incident very circumstantially. It does not appear in the above account whether the book was one that was lent to him for the purpose, or one that Thomas had copied; if the latter, it was an evidence of his early ability as a calligraphist. It is curious to notice the custom that prevailed there in this, that the pupils left something in the master’s hand as a guarantee for the payment of the school fees; and it indicates rather an unsatisfactory state of morality, in that generally they were not to be trusted. Moreover, the justice and generosity of these two men, as well as the grateful remembrance of their pupil, is worthy of remark, inasmuch as the story shows that the principles which animated all three were of that wisdom which is from above, having all the refinement of a higher life—‘first pure, then peaceable, gentle and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and of good works.’

The manner in which these two pious and learned men Father Florentius and Boheme, the rector of the school,

<sup>1</sup> *Vita Florentii*, chap. xxiv. § 2.

mutually aided each other in their works and labour of love comes out incidentally in another touching reminiscence which Thomas gives respecting himself at this time. The rector of the school was also one of the vicars of the principal church at Deventer, as well as a Master of Arts ; and he required several of the youths under his instruction who had the necessary qualifications to attend and sing in the choir. Father Florentius would often attend, to show his interest also in the work and to encourage those who took part in it, as well as for the sacred delight he himself seems to have had in the psalmody of God's House. The tale also shows the very sensitive influence which Florentius, from the very beginning of Thomas's career at Deventer, exercised over him.

'It was my custom,' says Thomas, 'to attend the choir singing in the church with my schoolfellows, according to the desire of my master, Boheme, who had the management of the choir as well as of the school. As often then as I saw my superior, Florentius, standing in the choir, the mere presence of so holy a man inspired me with such awe that I dared not speak when he looked up from his book. On one occasion it happened that I was standing near him in the choir, and he turned to the book we had and sang with us. And standing close behind me, he supported himself by placing both his hands upon my shoulders ; and I stood quite still, scarcely daring to move, so astonished was I at the honour he had done me.'<sup>1</sup>

Here some account of the manner in which Boheme carried on the school which Thomas attended at Deventer might naturally be looked for ; it is to be regretted, however, that very little more information can be obtained respecting it. We have, nevertheless, an account of the way in which the Public School at Zwolle, a neighbouring town, was conducted. We are indebted for this to the pious reverence of Joannes Buschius, the Chronicler of Windesheim, who makes some mention of it in a tribute of grateful acknowledgment which he pays to his preceptor John Cele. And as the school at Deventer is mentioned

<sup>1</sup> *Vita Florentii*, chap. xi. §§ 2, 3.

in the same chronicle as being on a like footing with this of Zwolle, we may infer that its history and character were very similar, especially when we find that Gerard Groote, the founder of the pious Brotherhoods, felt a real affection for him, and held frequent intercourse with both John Boheme, the rector of the school at Deventer, and John Cele, the head-master at Zwolle. Moreover, 'the Brothers of Common Life' took an interest, and occasionally gave assistance alike in the one school, as well as in the other. Historical accounts of the method and state of education at this time are very rare, and therefore all the more valuable; it may therefore help us to gain some idea of it, and of the scholastic discipline to which Thomas submitted, and with which he himself was afterwards associated, if I here relate what Buschius says respecting his old master at Zwolle and the school over which he presided.

After stating that John Cele had been educated at the University of Prague, and had been appointed 'Rector Scholarium' of the school at Zwolle in 1376 by the sheriff who was the patron, he goes on to say that the scholars numbered from eight hundred to a thousand, and were usually divided into eight classes; that Cele had two under-masters to assist him, and that some of these pupils were from the highest rank in the country. The subjects they taught were grammar, logic, ethics, and philosophy; under the latter head were included the arts of verse-making, elocution, mathematics, and physics. The school was a preparatory one for the university. Cele had received the degree of master of arts, and if not ordained to the priesthood, must have received some authority also to give public instruction in the church. He was the conductor of the choir, like Boheme of Deventer, and led the singing when his choristers sang at the early service, high mass, and vespers on Sundays and saints' days. The rest of the scholars he placed opposite to him, on the east side of the choir; and after the early service on Sundays and saints' days, he expounded the Epistle for the day, robed in his academical gown; and after the high mass had been cele-

brated, the appointed Gospel. At the conclusion of the afternoon service he delivered a lecture out of some learned book, and then dictated to his scholars some extracts from the writings of the Fathers. Above all things he impressed upon his pupils the necessity of their leading a pure and godly life. Any neglect of his instructions which was unrepented of, was punished not by payment of money, as formerly was the custom, but by stripes. Those young people whose dislike of moral purity led them into sin, were compelled to lie down on the floor of their class-room to be flogged with reeds, which chastisement the whole class had to take part in inflicting. Runaway scholars were not received back again by Cele, and those that were incorrigible, or found out in stealing anything, were expelled.<sup>1</sup>

As Thomas afterwards lived in the neighbourhood of Zwolle—within three miles of it—he himself became intimately acquainted with Cele, and had frequent opportunities of conversing with him. Having been a friend, and for awhile the companion, of Gerard Groote, and associated with him in promoting a godly reformation, Thomas à Kempis, after he left Deventer, regarded Cele as a link with the past; and from him he probably gained many of the particulars which he relates respecting the founder of that Brotherhood, which had so kindly received him into its bosom. For seventeen years this intimacy with Cele lasted, and Thomas looked up to him with almost filial affection. Some time before Cele's death the fame of Thomas began to be spread abroad, and several of Cele's older scholars, we are informed, were in the habit of coming to Mount St. Agnes to see Thomas, to be instructed by him in godly wisdom. As might be expected, Thomas gives us a further account of this excellent man, and as it was mixed up in some degree with himself I shall here introduce it, whilst speaking about the school over which Cele presided.

Thomas à Kempis, in the Chronicle which he kept of

<sup>1</sup> *Chronicles of Windesheim*, pp. 603-609.



other matters besides what directly related to the Monastery of Mount St. Agnes, has, among the records, a chapter about Cele. It is on the occasion of his death, and he thus speaks of him :—

In the year 1417 on the 9th May there died at Zwolle the Reverend John Cele, the zealous Rector of the Schools, the best instructor of youths, the most fervent lover of the Divine Name, and a pains-taking observer and preceptor of Church music in all the sacred offices. This excellent man, renowned for the holiness of his life, governed the schools a long time with great ability, and trained many of his scholars to be lovers of religion and of Divine worship. For among his scholars several of them attained to eminence in the religious life, and acquired honourable and important positions—some of them being made Fathers and Rectors in the Church. For, remarks Thomas, the disciples being subject to a good master were taught to despise the fleeting glories of the world for Christ's sake, and were led to see that there was nothing better for them in this life, nor any holier entrance into the ocean of Immortality, than to fight for the Lord of Heaven by abhorring the allurements of the world. It was a pleasant thing, then, in his days to go into the city of Zwolle, and behold the select multitude of scholars that frequented the place. Who can worthily narrate with what paternal solicitude he endeavoured to instruct all who came ; leading them to embrace the principles and habits of an honourable life, for the sake of a good name ? To this end, therefore, he frequently expounded the Holy Scriptures to them, impressing upon them its authority, and stirring them up to diligence in writing out the sayings of the Saints. Moreover, he taught them to sing accurately, sedulously to attend church, to honour God's ministers, to love religion, to converse with the devout and learned, to pray often, and willingly to engage in Divine praises. Always when present he ruled the whole choir joyfully with subdued accents of sweet concord ; and often on the high festivals he played on the organ with great exultation, thus becoming a thorough imitator of holy King David, who danced before the ark of God with great gladness.

This joy in holy praise is frequently alluded to as manifested in the behaviour of those connected with the 'Modern Devotion.' They seemed to enter into most of their sacred exercises with the enthusiasm of the blessed Mary, when she exclaimed, 'My soul doth magnify the

Lord ; and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.' For the praises of God in their mouths seemed delightful to them. Thomas à Kempis continues his account of Cele saying :—

The rich were able to pay their expenses, but the poor that gathered round him had frequently to ask for help by begging ; so he often became the father of the needy when asked for God's sake to assist them ; instructing them willingly and gratuitously, whilst he exhorted them to turn their studies to the glory of God. But he would not admit or patiently endure the unsettled and forward ; but either by correction changed them into better youths, or he expelled them from his presence, lest the perversity of their insolence might be detrimental to the establishing of what was good. He was therefore a rod of fear to the dissolute, but a staff of protection and health to well-disposed learners.

The fame of his virtues was spread to the remotest corners of Germany ; and his precepts were repeated in all parts of the world by the lips of his scholars. Amongst them were to be found natives of Brabant, Holland, Trèves, Utrecht, and Liège ; as well as youths from Gelderland and Cleves. Such numbers of talented men were educated at Zwolle, that the great city of Paris was aware of the excellency of this school ; holy Cologne was obliged to acknowledge it ; the learning of Erfurth has proclaimed it ; and even the holy Father himself was informed of its worth.

He gathered together for himself many learned books, especially books of divinity, which he caused to be distributed after his death,—some to churches, some to monasteries, and others to the poor among the faithful as gifts for the regulating of their souls. This reverend and truly commendable John Cele was a native of Zwolle, honourably educated, learned but not inflated with knowledge, temperate, chaste, humble, and devout. On one occasion, constrained by the motion of a pious desire, he went with his friend the venerable Gerard the Great, to visit the most religious John Ruysbroek, renowned for his excellent life and doctrine, in the region of Brabant, to see this most beloved man of God face to face, whom he had known long before by common report. They were both, continues Thomas, paternally received by him ; and being much refreshed by many things they heard from his mouth, and by his earnest example, they returned after a few days' sojourn with him to their own place. And from this time there was kindled in the hearts of both an intense flame of brotherly affection.

And certainly John Cele entertained a wonderful regard for Gerard from the very commencement of his preaching, and always had the heart of this dear man united to himself in Christ, since he held forth the Word of God bravely among the people, being himself unto them an example of life, and having an eager longing for their souls. On which account when he was evil spoken of, John Cele bore the weight of the opprobrium of men, who are never in want of some greivous indictment against a matter of well-doing. He encouraged and extolled the glorious work and words of the preacher ; and did not on account of the detractions of the envious cease from lauding so excellent a man, but frankly spoke out for him and for the devout men under him, before the magistrates and the people. Gerard also sent to this man several affectionate letters, the words of which show plainly the intimate love which existed between them. The whole number of his epistles Cele collected together, and had copied, for the sake of reading. Often also would he mention, in glowing terms, the name and deeds of the venerable Master Gerard as being the best example for himself that he could mention. This is the end of John Cele, a faithful servant of Jesus Christ, to whom God gave the heavenly fruition of eternal glory with all His saints. His body was buried in the Church of Windesheim.<sup>1</sup>

This short memoir gives but a sample of a most important and beneficial work carried on by the Brethren in the instruction of youth, during Thomas's days. It was, as has been said, the chief means by which they helped to train up a new generation. Their labours, however, in this field were of a diversified character. In many localities they had no schools of their own, but entered into free connection with those already in existence, and endeavoured to promote both the spiritual and temporal advancement of the pupils, as they did at Deventer and Zwolle, by presenting them with books, conversing with them on the subjects of religion and learning, and procuring them lodgings and means of earning a livelihood ; in other places they set up schools for themselves, and in these gave instruction in reading, writing, singing, Latin

<sup>1</sup> From the Chronicle of Brother Thomas à Kempis concerning those things not immediately connected with the Monastery of Mount St. Agnes, which is to be found at the end of the Chronicle of the said Mount St. Agnes.

(of which they constantly practised the speaking), and religion, but more particularly in Bible history.<sup>1</sup> But in all those places where the Brethren came forward to assist the masters of existing schools, the interest they took in the welfare of the scholars served in a high degree to promote the prosperity of the schools. Wherever there were such Brother-houses as at Deventer and Zwolle, there was sure to be a numerous circle of scholars. Indeed, their numbers in some places became enormous ; as, for example, at Herzogenbusch the school of the Brothers was often frequented by 1,200 youths.<sup>2</sup>

The cause lay partly in the fact that the poor students obtained from the Brethren subsistence and the necessary means of study. For, although the instruction was not in general gratuitous, this advantage was awarded to the indigent. In Herzogenbusch, besides a sevenfold distribution into classes, the scholars were divided into *Divites*, *Mediocres*, and *Pauperes*, and it is probable that according to this they paid either full charges, or half, or none at all. Wherever a large number of pupils could be counted upon, it was also possible to engage, and permanently retain the services of, more distinguished teachers. This served to counteract the wandering of learned men from place to place. A stronger bond between the teachers and the taught was formed. The former had it in their power to make a deeper and more enduring impression, while the latter, being better prepared, attained to greater success in the future prosecution of their studies. Besides, a Brother-house operated even upon the entire population of a town in raising the general tone of culture. In this manner at Amersford, about the middle of the sixteenth century, the knowledge of Latin became so common that the humblest tradesman understood and spoke it ; the better educated merchants knew Greek ; the girls sang Latin songs, and

<sup>1</sup> Delprat, ss. 96, 98.

<sup>2</sup> The school of Gröningen also was frequented by extraordinary numbers, especially under Regner Pradinus. See Delprat, s. 57.



good Latin might be heard everywhere in the streets.<sup>1</sup> This report may be highly varnished, but it is certain that the schools of the Brethren everywhere laboured to restore the simplicity and purity, and spread the knowledge of the Latin tongue.<sup>2</sup> It may also be said in their commendation, that they evinced a great taste for poetry, and sought to kindle a love of it among their scholars. Thomas himself is an example of it. This, however, had probably less connection with their Nominalistic views than with their fervent piety and mysticism.

In the *School*, then, no less than in the church and in their various Houses, the Brothers operated as reformers. Their keen, unwearied, and disinterested zeal for the education of youth, was itself something new. It showed that they were in earnest to train up an improved generation. There was still more, however, in the method of their instruction. They boldly and at once cast away the whole insipid absurdities of Scholasticism, now become mere lumber, and turned from the perplexing and useless to the sound and needful—from modern barbarism to the simplicity and purity of the ancients. Putting aside the subtle speculations of the Schoolmen, together with an imperfect system of teaching, the more learned of the Brethren eventually introduced a new era in learning. Among these the names of *Alexander Hegius* and *John Sintius* have acquired an imperishable repute. In general, however, the schools of the Brethren cultivated an improved Latin with so much success, and in the sequel advanced with so great a zeal the study of Greek, as to train and send forth the most eminent of the revivers of ancient literature at the close of the fifteenth and the commencement of the sixteenth centuries.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Delprat, s. 44.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* s. 119.

<sup>3</sup> For particulars see Delprat, sec. 119; and respecting Sintius, ss. 27 and 109; referred to by Ullmann, to whom I am indebted for these remarks. Neale says, 'Profane learning was then,' i.e. in the days of Gerard, 'just beginning to revive. It is as though he had foreseen the near approach of that fierce devil, unsanctified human intellect, and the chief means by which it

But to return to the career of à Kempis as a student at Deventer. Whilst in the house of that pious and benevolent lady, he continued to attend the Public School regularly, and was very modest, yet earnest and devout in his behaviour. He was diligent and persevering in learning and made great progress. Florentius was not only satisfied with him, but highly pleased, and after living with his benefactress for some time he was received into one of the Brother-houses. Thomas shall now again speak for himself as to what he thought of the Society he had entered, and as to how he spent the time with his Superior and with these godly men, when out of school.

Now having joined such a saintly man and his brethren, I had the opportunity of daily watching, and attending to their devout ways and conversation, and was greatly rejoiced in beholding their good lives and listening to the gracious words that proceeded from the mouths of these humble men of God. Because I never remember to have seen before such godly men so inflamed with the love of God and of their neighbours; who while living in the world had not a spark of worldliness about them, and seemed to care nothing for temporal gain or business. For abiding quietly at home, they busied themselves in copying books, especially the sacred Scriptures; and, frequently engaging in devout meditations, they obtained comfort and refreshment in the midst of their labours, by having recourse to ejaculatory prayer, or short aspirations of the soul. Early in the morning, they went to church and said the office of Matins, and during the celebration of Mass, they offered up to God the firstfruits of their lips and the outpourings of their hearts, and prostrating themselves on the floor they lifted up pure hands and the eyes of their souls to heaven, beseeching God with prayers and tears to be reconciled to them through the all-atoning Sacrifice.<sup>1</sup>

Thomas then informs us how he was ravished with would prevail—an ignorant priesthood, and the almost total proscription of Holy Scripture.’ And again he says:—The Universities of Leyden, Utrecht, and Groningen—the Grævii, the Gronovii, the Hensii, the Valckenaers, the Kusters, the Burmanns, the Hemsterhuis, all owe their name and their fame to the impulse given by the scholar-monk of Deventer. *Jansenist Church of Holland*, pp. 78, 79.

<sup>1</sup> *Vita Discip. D. Florentii*, ‘De prima congregatione clericorum in Daventriæ,’ ch. i. pp. 69, 70.

constantly beholding the spiritual conversation of the rector of this religious society, a man filled with wisdom and understanding in the knowledge of Christ, and adorned with all the Christian graces, living humbly with his presbyters and clerks, and imitating the form of the Apostolic life, when the Church was first founded at Jerusalem. Therefore, he continues, having one heart and one soul in God, everyone brought of the things that he possessed or had earned by his labours into the common fund, and received out from thence again what was simply necessary for food and raiment, taking no thought for the morrow, but enjoying all things in common, and calling nothing his own.

‘ Having therefore,’ he says, ‘ voluntarily dedicated themselves to God, they all studied to pay a willing obedience to the Rector or his Vicar in every particular. Holding holy obedience to be the highest rule of life, they endeavoured with all their might to conquer self, to subdue their evil passions, and to break the motions of their own natural will ; each fervently beseeching the others to seriously reprove him for his faults and negligences. Hence great grace and true devotion were among them, and they edified many both by their word and example. And, by patiently bearing the derisions of those who were in bondage to the world, they won many over to a contempt of worldly things. So that those who before time had despised them, now counting their past lives to be without honour and as foolishness, afterwards turned to God, and experienced in themselves the grace of devotion ; and having first purged their consciences, they openly confessed themselves to be true servants of God, and their real friends. Therefore many men and women, happily despising the vanities of the world, were turned to the Lord ; and endeavouring to follow the counsels of our beloved Father Florentius, diligently studied to observe the precepts of the Lord, and to engage in works of compassion, out of Christian devotion to the poor. For all his Brethren assisted him in holding forth the Word of Life, which as the light of heaven shone upon a troubled world, fast waning away.’<sup>1</sup>

Whilst Thomas remained in the Brother-house at

<sup>1</sup> *Vita Discip. D. Florentii*, ‘ De prima congregatione clericorum in Daventriæ,’ ch. i. p. 70.

Deventer, his chief and favourite occupation, when not at the school, or engaged in studying for it, appears to have been the copying of good and useful books, especially portions of the Holy Scriptures, like the Brothers. He received special instruction in the discharge of it, and he afterwards attached great importance to the faithful execution of this work, for he thus expresses himself on it in his sermon entitled 'De Scriptura Jesu : '—

To transcribe works which Jesus Christ loves, by which the knowledge of Him is diffused, His precepts taught, and the practice of them inculcated, is a most useful employment. If he shall not lose his reward who gives a cup of cold water to his thirsty neighbour, what will not be the reward of those, who by putting good works into the hands of these neighbours open to them the fountains of Eternal Life? Blessed are the hands of such transcribers! Which of the writings of our ancestors would now be remembered if there had been no pious care bestowed in transcribing them? <sup>1</sup>

And if it be remembered that in those days printing had not come into use, we cannot speak too highly of the labours and the unremitting diligence of these pious Brethren in multiplying by their pens the Word of God, and other books whereby their fellow creatures might be profited. Many valuable works of great authors were written out by them, which they helped to preserve and hand on and down to others; but what is of greater moment, they did their best—they wrought day and night with their own hands—to diffuse the Holy Scriptures, and to make known to others the will of God and the glad tidings of salvation.

Thomas became, as it is well known, an excellent calligraphist, as many of the books written by his own hands, which yet remain and are still to be seen in the Royal Library of Brussels, will testify. And here at Deventer in the House of the Brothers of Common Life it was that he first learnt to write books in the superior way he was accustomed to do; for when speaking of what he did, he says, 'Here I learnt how to write;' from which it

<sup>1</sup> *Conciones*. Vigesima.



is obvious that he refers not merely to the art of writing, which he doubtless learnt before, probably at Kempen, but to the thorough mode of copying and writing out entire books. As the chief part of Thomas's life was afterwards spent in this manual labour of transcribing, as well as in composing devout and useful books, we need not be surprised that he held the work in great esteem, and valued his labours not merely because they were the chief means of his contributing to the support of the Brotherhood among whom he had cast in his lot, but because his exertions would be the means of carrying good to others, and that many, whom he would probably never know, would be benefited by them. And in giving instruction to the younger Brethren, of whom he afterwards had the guidance, he was careful to impress upon them the importance of doing their work well, for thus he writes in his 'Manual for Young Men : '—

'Now it is of much profit for thee to write after an approved copy. For to have a good and correct copy, conduces mightily to write well, and besides rendereth it delightful to be read over often. Whence a lover of good writing saith to the writer of sacred books, "Write thou correctly, distinctly, and orderly." Do not be in too great haste to make an end, neither leave thou anything imperfect. For he has done a good deed who has neglected nothing which the state and order of the thing requireth to be done.

'Be not tired out in this thy labour through the tediousness of it, for God is the author of every good work, Who will render to every man a due reward in the heavens according to the pious intention he had in view. And when thou art dead many shall speak well of thee when they read thy volumes, and what was once written by thee with so great care.' And making use of the same encouragement as he did on another occasion, he adds, 'The Lord hath said in the Gospel, "Whosoever shall give but a cup of cold water for My sake to him that is thirsty, he shall not lose his reward." By how much more shall he not lose his reward in Heaven who giveth of the living water of saving wisdom to him that readeth in the Book written with the finger of God ?' <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Doctrinale seu Manuale Juvenum*, ch. iv. p. 214.

Here also while at Deventer Thomas continued to perfect himself in the Latin language, and further engaged in such studies as were clearly meant to be a preparation for those services he would be occupied with when he entered upon his novitiate. Here he was taught to read and understand the Scriptures, so as to have a clear perception of their meaning, and to meditate after some approved rule on Divine things; here he heard lectures on moral subjects, and discourses on devotion; here also he joined in pious conferences on sacred themes, which the Brethren used to have among themselves; as well as in that sweet intercourse which they almost daily had with their Superior—sometimes when he casually met them in the common room, or when he walked in the garden with a few of the Brethren around him.

The number of Clerks or Clerics living with Thomas in the same Brother-house, which was one of the first of this confraternity, and served as a pattern for many others which were afterwards established, were, as our author tells us, generally twenty; but in addition to these there were three laymen, who were charged with the temporal affairs of the house, viz., the *Procurator*, who made all the purchases, and transacted whatever business had to be discharged out of doors; the *Cook*, who prepared the meals in the kitchen, and assisted in distributing them at the table; and the *Tailor*, who mended and looked after their clothes.<sup>1</sup> Three or four of the clerks were ordained clergymen, and the head of the House was called the Rector, or Prior. As the Brothers were so much occupied in transcription, they appear to have had also among the other functionaries of their establishment the *Rubricator*, the *Ligator*, and the *Scripturarius*.<sup>2</sup>

But the employment of writing did not exempt Thomas, any more than the others, from taking a share in the necessary household work. It was the custom of the Brothers

<sup>1</sup> 'Tertius vestes sarciebat.' (*Vita Arnold Schoonoven*, No. xi. sec. 2, p. 109.)

<sup>2</sup> Neale's *Jansenist Church*, p. 96.

to take their turn to assist the cook for instance in the kitchen, so that they all might be servants in turn to their Brethren, not declining to discharge the very meanest offices, so that hereby they might be well exercised in the grace of humility. Thomas especially makes mention of his having often to go and draw water out of the well—lying at some distance in the garden—for the use of the household : and in telling this, he takes occasion to relate what might have been a sad accident, but which providentially was not attended by any serious injury. The story was this : One day whilst Florentius, their beloved Rector, was holding a collation, as it was called—i.e. giving them friendly instruction on sacred things—round the well, several of the Brothers sat upon the brim while listening to his earnest exhortations, when through heaviness one of them fell asleep, and forthwith presently fell head foremost into the well ; prompt measures were taken for his deliverance, and wonderful to relate, by God's goodness he was rescued without much hurt. The well was narrow, but to the great astonishment of them all, the man that had fallen in was found upon his feet, and was drawn up alive and sound. Thomas indeed was not present when this happened, but his having frequently to draw water from the well reminded him of it, and as it is suggested, the consideration of it was a good memento to him to be vigilant and attentive to the exhortations of his reverend preceptor.

In doing the servile offices of the House, there was also this further advantage which he mentions, that whilst the one whose turn it was to assist was labouring thus for the rest, all the others were obliged to offer up prayers for him. And for this reason, even Florentius, their pious Rector, would by no means be excused from taking his week in turn, however much he was importuned not to do it. For he taught his disciples this lesson by his own example—that works of piety ought sometimes to give way to works of charity ; and, that an humble soul is capable of benefiting more by rightly doing the work of a family, out of love to Christ's members, whensoever called thereto, than either

by being at church, or by prayers and meditations in the closet; yea, that the humblest offices of charity were to be preferred in such cases before what seemed more sacred.

There are several other particulars of interest relative to his sojourn at Deventer, that appear in the slight sketches which Thomas à Kempis gives of the first members of this Brotherhood, which I purpose to bring before the reader, but before I proceed with them it is necessary that I should give some more explicit account of the origin and history of 'the Brothers of Common Life' and of its founder, Gerard Groote, or Gerard the Great, as he was afterwards called by the members of the confraternity; since he is ever regarded as the prime mover of this fervid manifestation of real Christian life.



## CHAPTER V.

The Biography of Gerard Groote, the Founder of the Brothers of Common Life, chiefly by the pen of à Kempis—Gerard early distinguished for his ability—His love of the world—A change of heart gradually wrought in him—An outward change also manifest—Retires for three years to a Carthusian Monastery—Afterwards comes forth to preach, and effects numerous conversions—He excites the animosity of some of the Clergy, and of the Mendicant Friars—Through their instigation he is inhibited from preaching—His obedience to his Bishop—Still carries on various schemes of promoting true religion—His founding the Community of the Brothers of Common Life—He with John Cele pays an interesting visit to Ruysbroek—His purpose to form an Order of Canons Regular—Seized with the plague—Previous to his death appoints Florentius to succeed him—The reforming character of his religious efforts.

POSTERITY is chiefly indebted to the pen of Thomas à Kempis for what can be learnt concerning this high-minded and most enthusiastic servant of God, Gerard Groote, the originator of the religious movement in Holland called the *Modern Devotion*, and the founder of the Communities of the *Brothers of Common Life*. Another source of original information respecting this excellent man is to be found in the *Chronicles of Windesheim* by John Buschius, a contemporary of Thomas. A few other particulars are gathered from other authors and given to us in the 'Biographie Nouvelle,' and by Delprat, Ullmann, Mooren, Neale, and others.

Thomas à Kempis in his preface to the *Life of Gerard* acknowledges that he had not seen him in the flesh—for he died four years after à Kempis was born. But he adds, 'Yet I have personally known many of his most intimate disciples, from whom I have frequently heard many things concerning his blessed actions, so that you must not think that these things which I have described arise from my own imagination, but that I have received them as

thoroughly verified from really trustworthy persons of both sexes.' <sup>1</sup>

Gerard Groote was born upon the Brink at Deventer in the year 1340 of distinguished and wealthy parents. His father, Werner Groote, held the office of burgomaster and sheriff in the town; and his mother is said to have united to a deep piety a most generous charity. Gerard received the rudiments of education in the school of his native place. And showing great powers of mind and an ardent thirst for knowledge, he was sent by his parents at the age of fifteen to the then famous University of Paris; and in about three years received the degree of Master of Arts; having devoted himself especially to the study of theology and the Canon law, not only from a desire to be a teacher of men, but because, from family interests, the clerical profession offered brilliant prospects of promotion. He was also ambitious of distinction, for says Thomas, 'As yet he did not in studying seek the glory of Christ, but following the shadow of a great name, he cared most intensely for human fame.' <sup>2</sup>

Whilst at Paris, however, he fortunately seems to have formed a close and intimate friendship with Henry Aeger, also called after the place of his birth Henry de Kalkar, who afterwards distinguished himself by his works on rhetoric and music, and by the history of the Carthusian order of monks, to which he belonged. Henry de Kalkar was however twelve years the senior of Gerard, and is also mentioned as having been his confessor at Paris. <sup>3</sup> After staying here some little time, holding discussions with certain divines, wherein his acuteness and ability for learning were taken notice of, the Dutch student returned to his native country at the desire of his father. Here he presently displayed a measure of his remarkable attainments in disputing, examining, interpreting, and teaching, and became much admired and courted. Having then obtained much

<sup>1</sup> Thom. à Kemp., *Vita Ven. Gerardi Magni, Prologus.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* chap. ii. p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ullmann, *Reformers before the Reformation*, ii. 61, 62.

glory in his native place, and actuated by a longing desire to visit other Universities and learned men, he shortly afterwards repaired to Cologne, with a handsome equipage. Here he lived in great style, clothed as a nobleman—for his father made him a liberal allowance—and the best company of the University and city were ambitious of entertaining him. And here, holding conferences with the learned, and having obtained a professorship in the University, he was listened to with interest both in private and at his public lectures, and grew daily into greater repute.

It was not long however before, that as the member of a noble family, he obtained several prebends, and was made Canon of Utrecht and Aix-la-Chapelle. 'But,' says his affectionate biographer, Thomas à Kempis, 'being not as yet inspired by the Spirit of God, he walked along the broad ways of this world, until through God's loving-kindness he became changed into another man.'<sup>1</sup> Having an affluent fortune, it appears that he trod the usual path of a worldly-minded clergyman. He took part in public amusements, treated himself to the richest food and most costly wines, dressed his hair, wore gay clothes, a girdle with silver ornaments, and a cloak of the finest fur. Gifted with a fine intellect, and having gained a large acquisition in knowledge, he was a man of mark, according to the prevailing spirit of the times. But soon deeper and more serious thoughts were awakened within him.

It came to pass that one day, whilst at Cologne, when diverting himself as a spectator at some public game, being very intent upon it, there came up to him a stranger of a goodly and reverend aspect, wearing the habit of a hermit, and whose attention had for some time been drawn to the unusual powers of mind that Gerard possessed, and said to him, 'Why standest thou here intent upon vain things? Another man thou oughtest to become.'<sup>2</sup> This indeed seemed strange to him, yet it did not make much impres-

<sup>1</sup> Thom. à Kemp., *Vita Gerardi*, ii. 2.

<sup>2</sup> 'Quid hic stas vanis intentus? Alius homo fieri debes' (*ibid.* ch. iii. 2).

sion on him at the time. It is true that whilst living a luxurious and worldly life as many of the canons of those days did, a secret attraction for those sublime and pathetic doctrines of Mystic Christianity was taking possession of him. Cologne was at that time one of the fountains of mysticism, where thousands of souls, parched with the formulas of scholasticism, came to refresh themselves. There might be found in that place great numbers of the *Friends of God*, who had been edified by the zeal of Nicholas of Basle; and the echoes of the eloquent preaching of Master Eckhart, of Tauler, and of Suso, again resounded through the vaulted arches of the grand and majestic cathedral.

But he did not as yet yield himself up to God. Another warning, however, came to him after this, for when he returned again to Deventer he was seized with a grievous malady and lay at the point of death; and when he came to make his confession in order to receive extreme unction, the priest required that he should destroy all his manuscripts relative to magic and astrology. Gerard, after some resistance, made the sacrifice, and sent them to the Brink, where they were solemnly burnt. But there was still another voice before he openly broke with the world. This came through his former friend and confessor at Paris, Henry de Kalkar, who effected at his house an inward and definite conversion. Kalkar had been made Prior of the Carthusian monastery of Monichuysen, near Arnheim, and hearing that Gerard was again at Utrecht, which was only a dozen leagues from Arnheim, he went there without delay to see him. Gerard expressed great joy at seeing him who had been his Mentor and acquaintance at Paris; and after the first expressions of friendship had been made, Henry revealed to him the true object of his visit.

He conversed with him many days together regarding the sovereign good, the Life Eternal, and the Judgment which follows death. 'Death is suspended over our heads,' said he to his friend; 'we know not either the day or the hour of its approach: suddenly we have to render an



account of the actions of our life, and there will be much demanded of those who have received much. If, on the other hand, you would consecrate your faculties to the cause of truth and virtue, you would profit by the excellent graces of those who follow Christ.' These conversations brought back to the conscience of Gerard the warning of the good hermit, the holy ecstasies that at times had pervaded him in the cathedral at Cologne, and the warning of the priest at Deventer when he appeared to be near death, but especially the remorse for the sins of his youth, and his frivolous life as a canon. The words of his friend, by grace from on high, softened his heart. He became ashamed of the vanity of his conduct, and at last declared himself convinced, and determined to change his life. He was yet only at the age of thirty-four.

A statement of the motives and of the course of this conversion is found in a writing of Master Gerard which rightly refers to this epoch, and which is entitled '*Conclusa et proposita non vota in nomine Domini a magistro Gerardo edita*,'<sup>1</sup> and commences with these words: 'Ad gloriam et honorem, et servitium Dei, intendo vitam meam ordinare, et ad salutem animæ meæ.' There are many points touched upon, but we need only notice that he did not regard it as essential to take vows, since he saw many monks and priests tread them underfoot; it was sufficient for one who had been touched by the holy, revivifying Spirit that he should come to some deliberate conclusion and make immediate resolutions, which he should forthwith carry out.

'At that time,' says Thomas à Kempis, 'the state of the world appeared most lamentable; there were few that preached the Word of Life, either by their lips or their lives; fewer who preserved continency; and, grievous to say, the name of holy religion, and the state of devotion, for lack of the Holy Ghost, exceedingly fell away from the footsteps of the Fathers. Yet among the Carthusians the hidden light of celestial life remained, which though tolerably severe to those who were inclined towards carnal

<sup>1</sup> Thom. à Kemp., *Vita Gerardi*, ch. xviii.

things, was nevertheless very acceptable to God, and very desirable and pleasant to those who were fervent in spirit.'

After some days the worthy Prior returned to his place greatly rejoicing that the seed of God had fallen into good ground, and that Gerard had been so speedily captured by the hook of Christ out of the troublous waters of the world. And contemplating this momentous conversion, à Kempis tells us, that out of the fulness of his heart he exclaimed, 'Oh the stupendous and adorable clemency of our Saviour! Oh the virtue and grace of the ineffable Spirit, who can so easily change the heart of man, which He inwardly visits and illumines! This is the mighty power of God alone, Who through the benediction of His good pleasure hath previously chosen His elect deacon Gerard, turning the lion into a lamb, predestinating him who aforetime was in the world to be incorporated into Himself, and hath prepared him to preach His Word to the ends of the earth to many cities and people, to the honour and praise of His holy Name.'

Not long after this, Gerard began of his own free choice to live altogether a different life. For after due deliberation, and trusting in Christ, he renounced the whole of his benefices, threw aside his costly garments, and clothed himself in a simpler habit, such as was worn by an humble clerk, preferring the contempt of the world to his delight in riches. At the sight of this change, they who had so much admired him before, now concluded that he was beside himself, and that too much learning had made him mad. 'Behold,' they said, 'he who before this wore ornamental robes, now covers himself with a garment of grey undressed wool : and he who delighted in convivial banquets and dainty food, rejects these delights, and seeks what is common and of little worth ; he flies from honours, he loves poverty.'<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless the hand of the Lord was with him ; and from being proud he became humble, from loving delicacies he became abstemious, from being worldly-

<sup>1</sup> Thom. à Kemp., *Vita Gerardi*, ch. v. 1.

minded he became spiritual, from searching after curious matters he held to what were simple and devout.

When therefore the people were talking and wondering at the sudden change of so distinguished a man, one of the citizens went secretly to him from the leading men, desiring to learn more fully why the esteemed master eschewed the pleasurable society of the world. And when he had faithfully learned many things from him, and thoroughly ascertained the secret of his renunciation, so that he understood the nature of what seemed doubtful, he went away greatly edified, saying, 'Why do those ignorant and vulgar people utter such foolish things concerning so good and prudent a man? Never did he undertake so wise and sensible a step as when he forsook the ways of the world, and resolved to serve God in the spirit of humility. How blessed would he be who was willing to imitate him, and did not mock at well-doing: for if he persevered in the course he had taken, he would be the means of doing much good.'<sup>1</sup>

Gerard was in no wise diverted from his purpose, but in order that the Divine seed planted in his heart might take root and have time to spring up, so that it might not be a mere transient feeling, which like the morning cloud passeth away, he withdrew himself from his native city and from his father's house, and retired to the Carthusian Monastery at Monichuysen, over which his friend presided, and there spent three years in serious self-reflection, prayer, and the study of the Holy Scriptures, reading the Fathers, especially the works of St. Augustine, and submitting himself to the most rigorous penitential discipline.<sup>2</sup> It is evident that Thomas à Kempis must at one time or another have visited this place, for alluding to this seclusion of Gerard at Monichuysen he adds, 'and I have seen the place of his

<sup>1</sup> Thom. à Kemp, *Vita Gerardi*, v. 1, 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* vi. 2 and viii. 2. 'Tribus autem annis, lectioni et orationi vacavit, antequam prædicare inciperet.' Perhaps in this he followed the example of St. Paul, who retired for three years into Arabia after his conversion, and before he fully devoted himself to the work of the ministry. See Gal. i. 17, 18.

habitation, in which this candle of the Lord and friend of the Omnipotent lay hidden for a time, until it was placed upon a candlestick, that the example of his light might be shewn unto all men.<sup>1</sup> This new soldier of Christ, then, continues à Kempis, remained intrepidly steadfast in the camp of the Carthusians. He was not inwardly overcome with tediousness in his cell, nor broken down by the laborious exercises of the House, but as a good recluse he kept watch over his heart and lips. Although feeble in body, he wholly abstained from the use of flesh and other lawful things, and passed considerable portions of his nights in watching and prayer; for mindful of his former iniquities and indulgences, he desired to crucify the flesh with the affections and lusts for the name of Jesus, and in the spirit of fervour to bring his body into subjection to the spirit.<sup>2</sup> His object was to learn for himself what he was afterwards to teach others.

At length by God's good pleasure the time arrived for bearing good fruit; and by the counsel of wise men and the religious Brethren, he was called forth to preach the Word of Life openly, that by his voice, and through the example of a holy conversation, he might inflame the hearts of sinners and profit many souls. From his former learning, his great abilities, his late retirement for prayer, and the study of the Scriptures, and from the examination and discipline of his own soul, and now from his burning zeal to win souls for Christ, which was ever present to him, he was eminently qualified to undertake the work of an Evangelist, and consequently to speak with great power and efficacy. Having first obtained a license from Florentius von Wevelinchoven, the Bishop of Utrecht, to preach the Gospel over the whole of his diocese, we find him travelling in a coarse woven garment through towns and villages, everywhere exhorting the people to repentance and amendment of life with overpowering eloquence. He entirely abandoned scholastic subtilties, and the vulgar arguments drawn from the fears of hell and the joys of a

<sup>1</sup> *Vita Gerardi*, chap. vi.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* vii. i.



material paradise, which formed the current coin of the preaching of the mendicant monks; and on the contrary he dwelt on the love of God, His regard for man, the necessity of an interior life, and that the kingdom of Heaven consists in righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost; for the possession of which they must aspire with all their strength, that they may become participators in the reign of God.

He was as yet only in deacon's orders, and the Bishop urged him to enter the priesthood, but having a profound sense of its dignity and of his own unworthiness, he shrunk from this exalted office, choosing rather to shew his obedience to God in a more humble position.<sup>1</sup>

Thomas à Kempis describes him as preaching before listening assemblies of clergy, laymen, and religious people, discoursing alike to men and women of the upper and lower classes, to the learned and the unlearned, to magnates and consuls, to servants and children, to the rich and the poor, to neighbours and strangers, and with such effect that numerous conversions followed.<sup>2</sup> He laboured, says his pious biographer, in the spirit of John the Baptist, laying the axe to the root of the tree, so that all, fearing the judgment to come, put away their sins, and brought forth fruits worthy of repentance, continuing in prayers, alms-deeds, and fasting. And multitudes of those that heard his sermons were pricked to the heart; and coming to him, submitted themselves to his direction, and cast away from them all the vanity of the world.<sup>3</sup>

He was remarkable for a very retentive memory; even so much so that any of the sermons of the saintly Fathers

<sup>1</sup> Buschius, *Chron. Windes.* ch. i. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ullmann likens these evangelizing efforts to those of old carried on by Peter de Bruys and Henry of Lausanne, and afterwards by St. Norbert, and in still more recent times by George Fox, William Penn, and others. *Reformers before the Reformation*, ii. 64.

Neale says, 'His mission wonderfully resembles that of Wesley, and the tenor of his letters is exactly like that of the English missionary and his friends. But he met at the outset with greater support.' *Jansenist Church*, p. 76.

<sup>3</sup> Thom. à Kemp., *Vita Gerardi*, viii. 2.

which he might have read, he could reproduce from memory, when it pleased him. Indeed, on one occasion, in the Synod of Utrecht, he preached word for word publicly, before all the clergy, a sermon of St. Bernard concerning the conversion of St. Paul.<sup>1</sup> It was not, however, the fruitfulness of his discourses, and the ready flow of his eloquence, that so much impressed his hearers, but a very different thing. Here was a preacher who spoke, not because it was his professional duty, or for the sake of profit, but willingly and gratuitously, from a sincere love of Christ and with a burning zeal for souls:<sup>2</sup> so that it was impossible not to mark the deep concern and intense seriousness with which he spoke, as of one who had learned by experience the truth of what he said, and who sealed and enforced it by his daily course of life. Self-possessed, even when most impassioned, Gerard endeavoured to turn to account on the instant the prevailing mood of the audience. He occasionally allowed his eyes to range over the bystanders in order to examine them; and then at once, as if he thoroughly understood them, adapted his discourse to their condition and necessities.<sup>3</sup>

His success was the further increased by his not addressing the people in the foreign Latin tongue, but in their own native dialect.<sup>4</sup> Hence at Deventer, Campen, Zwolle, Utrecht, Leyden, Delft, Gouda, Amsterdam, and many other places, where he first preached to the people in their own tongue, the whole population seemed to come forth to hear him, neglecting their meals and most urgent business, and thronged in such multitudes that in some places where the church was not able to contain them, he would go out into the church-yard and there address them.<sup>5</sup> And since his heart burned vehemently for the conversion of all men, he went into towns and villages where they had no one to preach the Gospel to them, and to such places where

<sup>1</sup> Buschius, *Chron. Windes.* ch. i. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* i. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Thom. à Kemp., *Vita Floren.* vi. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas à Kempis calls it 'Sermonem Teutonicum.' Buschius in the *Chron. Windes.*, 'Belgico sermone.'

<sup>5</sup> Thom. à Kemp., *Vita Gerardi*, xv. 1. Buschius, *Chron. Wind.* i. 3.

persons in authority entreated him to come. Wherever he found admission he was indefatigable in preaching; often delivering to the same people in one day two or three sermons, or protracting his discourse for two or three hours at a time, when he saw them thirsting for more of the Waters of Life; for as they mused upon what he said, he seemed to behold the fire of divine life kindling within their souls, and he went on till it had got, as it were, a firm hold—striking while the fire was hot within them. The issue of all this was not merely a temporary excitement, but actual conversions and permanent amendment.

Many of the clergy as well as the laity, the rich as well as the poor, the old as well as the young, those living in sin, as well as those of a good conversation, were roused by his preaching to seek after a holier and better life. Many, we are told, were induced by him to give up stolen goods, or property unjustly gotten, to despise the vanities of the world, to dedicate themselves more entirely to God's service, to live in chastity and temperance, and to seek after the heavenly country with all earnestness, so that they might behold the beatific vision of God, and enjoy the perpetual society of angels. Never had there been such an awakening in these parts for many generations; never such a change witnessed among the people, who, giving up a worldly and foolish manner of living, were created anew in true faith, hope, and charity, with an ardent desire after eternal things.<sup>1</sup> 'Blessed therefore be God,' exclaims one of his devout admirers, 'Who has raised up such a preacher among us, and handed down such preaching, that through it the light of celestial life might shine upon us in this uncertain world.'<sup>2</sup>

But, continues Thomas à Kempis, it would take a long time to enumerate the labours which he underwent in preaching; the conflicts he encountered in disputing with those who would subvert the faith; the earnest exhortations that he made in private to confirm and establish the Brethren and Sisters in a holy life. These things are widely manifest in his epistles which he addressed

<sup>1</sup> Thom. à Kemp., *Vita Gerardi*, i. 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* viii. 3.

to divers persons for their consolation. Thus he says in a certain letter to some priests in Amsterdam, where he had many friends, 'Do not be terrified, my beloved, if ye hear aught against me, from those at Campen. All things succeed as I hoped for, and as God would have it. Moreover the Church at Campen has wonderfully increased; praise and glory be to God in the highest. Let not the love that is within us burn low, but vehemently. Let us despise earthly commendations, and be as patterns of the most exalted character, to the praise of our Creator.'

It has been said that Gerard's expressions and letters strongly resemble those of Wesley at the commencement of his career: and in the above words we have an illustration of it. But we can easily distinguish points of difference between them, especially when they came into conflict with Church authority,—for, as Thomas à Kempis goes on to inform us of Gerard—

Perceiving that many ecclesiastical dignitaries were opposed to him, and, through hostile emulation, endeavoured to hinder his preaching, so that at last he was inhibited by a crafty edict, he humbly yielded to their fury and malice, not willing to raise up a tumult of the people against the clergy. For he said respecting the authorities, to those who were indignant at an inhibition so got up, 'They are our superiors, and we wish, as we ought, and are bound, to obey their edicts. For we seek not to hurt any, nor to excite scandal. The Lord knoweth well His own, and whom He hath chosen from the beginning: and He will call them, moreover, through His grace, without our aid, as it pleases Him.' He therefore kept silence for a time, and in the meanwhile betook himself to private exhortations; imparting with alacrity of heart the word of consolation to all that came to him.<sup>1</sup>

Opinions may differ as to the course he should have taken; for some may think that while he was doing so much good, he should have persevered in spite of the prohibition of his superior, especially as it had been brought about by the instigation of those who hated to be reformed, and disliked any attempt to lead the people to a better life, inasmuch as it condemned them also.

It was a crucial circumstance, and we may imagine how

<sup>1</sup> Thom. à Kemp, *Vita Gerardi*, ix, 1.



much Gerard felt his being stopped in the midst of his blessed work, and what earnest thought and prayer he must have given to the question, 'Must I obey them that are over me or no?' Seeking simply, however, to be guided by the will of God, he chose, what to many will no doubt be regarded as the only right course, as a general rule, and submitted himself; leaving the result in God's hands, Who could, if He thought fit, overrule this untoward act to further good. He would not do wrong in order that he might go on doing good in the way he had hitherto so successfully prosecuted; and he set an example of such singleness of soul, humbleness of mind, full trust in God, and readiness to obey, that it was as rare as it was beautiful to behold; and it was not without its influence upon others, in guiding them into the way of righteousness.

But we notice the further difficulties of his position, and his vigilance against the snares laid for him, ere the prohibition came. Although his success in preaching had been marvellous, though there were many excellent men that warmly supported him, Gerard was not ignorant of human nature, and saw the storm coming; for he felt that his faithfulness in preaching the Word had made him many enemies. He ever entertained a sincere respect for the sacred office of the ministry, and for those who lived up to their holy profession, but he attacked with the most unsparing severity the corrupt manners of the clergy, especially of such as led unchaste lives; and in consequence of this several designing men secretly maligned him to the people, and rose up against him. Many of the common clergy and monks dogged his steps, viewing all he said and did with suspicion. He was, however, put upon his guard, and it is said that on this account he usually kept a notary and two witnesses at his side, in order that he might not be without counsel and help in the event of his being accused of breaking the laws of the Church.<sup>1</sup> His enemies, nevertheless, at last, prevailed upon the Bishop of Utrecht to forbid Gerard to preach in public. At this the

<sup>1</sup> Delprat, p. 11. Ullmann, ii. 66.

friends of Gerard seemed more moved than he himself was. Strong representations were made to the Bishop as to the injustice of this edict. Thomas à Kempis has preserved a letter written by a contemporary on his behalf,<sup>1</sup> in which the greatness of the work Gerard had accomplished in the revival of true religion is largely set forth, and which states, that many persons in divers places had forsaken their evil and perverse ways, and had turned to the Lord. The great enemy of souls, therefore, continues the writer, had stirred up malicious men against him, to obstruct him. And now that they had got their way, the wicked rejoiced, and the hearts of the true servants of God were made sad. The said writer then intreats that the causes and reasons of this inhibition should be publicly produced, and that there should be a suspension of it until this had been done.

This appeal to the Bishop appears to have had a good result, and in all probability the inhibition was removed, as we hear of Gerard still carrying on his blessed work of evangelizing the people. The Mendicant Friars were however his most bitter and unceasing enemies. He was much opposed to their going about the country begging and making a trade of religion, as it led to many abuses; besides they were frequently working in opposition to the regular ministry of the Church, and spreading false doctrines among the people. Gerard roundly denounced their religious views and ways. One of the friars, named Bartholomæus, was particularly obnoxious, and tried in many ways to impede the work in which Gerard was engaged. Moreover this man propagated false views of religion. And as the Chronicler of Windesheim gives us the account, Gerard had him cited before the Bishop's court, when he was condemned, and had to do penance, by having to stand in a conspicuous situation, with two pieces of coloured cloth sewn upon his vestments.<sup>2</sup> This seems to have been an unpardonable offence to the whole confraternity, and they appear to have used every effort after this to effect Gerard's downfall; for when

<sup>1</sup> *Vita Gerardi*, chap. xviii. sec. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Book i. chap. iv. p. 17.

they could not prevail against him with their Bishop, one of their number, as Thomas à Kempis tells us, 'undertook a journey to Rome that he might bring a charge against this man of God ; that by one crafty means or another Gerard might be put to silence, which indeed he would greatly have feared to do, if he had been moved by the Spirit of God. But, continues à Kempis, God, the Arbiter of the just and the Lover of peace, disposed it otherwise than as the wicked troubler had designed. For suddenly becoming ill on the way, he died, and all his evil machinations came to nothing.<sup>1</sup>

We are not to imagine, however, that the Mendicant Friars ceased from their bitter animosity : for it is evident that somehow or other Gerard was again inhibited by high authority a short while before his death, and that in one way or other their object was gained. This seems clear, for à Kempis has preserved another letter from Gerard's intimate friend William de Salvarvillâ, precentor of the cathedral at Paris, and Archdeacon of Brabant, which he wrote to Pope Urban VI. to solicit his permission for Gerard to preach again.<sup>2</sup> Depicting in glowing terms Gerard's zeal for the faith, his disinterested labours and the abundant proofs which had resulted from them, he intreated the Pope that he would suffer him to have license to continue the work. The appeal was not altogether unsuccessful, but as concessions from this quarter were usually tardy, it came too late. The interdict does not appear to have been removed in his lifetime ; and when at last the permission was given him to preach in public again, God had called His faithful servant to Himself.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Vita Gerardî*, ix. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* xviii. 23. This ecclesiastic enjoyed a high character both for religion and learning ; and other circumstances gave considerable weight to his partisanship.

<sup>3</sup> It must here be observed that this decree against Gerard's preaching is variously stated by those who give a brief account of it. Thus Ullmann says, 'Salvarvillâ endeavoured to procure a revocation of this prohibition, but in vain.' Neale, however, says, 'It would seem to have been removed.' And Mooren, that the application of Salvarvillâ '*met with good success, and Groot continued to preach.*' Now these seemingly contradictory statements have

Gerard, however, was not idle when he could no longer preach in public ; he did not fold his hands, and sit down in despair as if he had nothing to do. As one door was shut, another seemed opened to him ; God had another grand work for him to bring about and establish ; and this was, the taking steps which led eventually to the establishing of the Canons Regular in connection with, or rather as a further development of, the Society of 'the Brothers of Common Life,' so that his remaining days were productive of far more important consequences, than the most sanguine desires that he or his faithful friends could have entertained.

He had been the means, under God, of awakening a new life in the souls of many of the clergy ; and besides this, other devout servants of God drew closer to him ; and now that he could himself no longer preach openly as aforetime, he called upon them to carry on the good work he had begun—assisting them by his means when needed. Such were Florentius Radewin, John Gronde, John Brinde-rink, and others. He urged other educated men to enter the ministry, and labour for the good of souls. Already to a great extent he had provided schools in many places where they were wanted, that the young might early be taught and trained in the fear of God. And, where large public schools did exist, he seems to have been on most intimate terms with the head-masters, and taken great interest in such of their scholars as shewed signs of sincere piety and ability. He often invited them, says à Kempis, to his house, both for counsel and to hear the Word of God read to them, that they might be instructed in the way of life.

Both Gerard and those who were associated with him in his labours paid much attention to this, and encouraged

evidently arisen from the confusion of two accounts, or the want of further information to elucidate the course of events. One of the above writers refers to the earlier suspension probably, and another of them to the later—one to that issued by the Archbishop of Utrecht, which was cancelled, the other to that of the Pope, which, though withdrawn, came too late to be of any service, as Gerard had died while the prohibition was in force.



them in every likely way they could. Gerard had an admirable way of winning their affections in his conversation ; and a considerable alteration for the better was effected in the conduct of many of them ; for they became willing to embrace an humble and laborious life, so that they might live unto God, rather than enjoy all the vanities and luxuries of the world. Hence a great number of promising youths and poor clerks had flocked to him from all parts—John à Kempis, Thomas's elder brother, being of the number—who by his means partly received their education free of charge ; while at the same time he shewed them that they must try and do something for themselves and not altogether live on the charity or bounty of others ; for he set every one a work to do, which generally was to copy out portions of the sacred Scriptures, pieces of devotion, or the writings of some ancient author. Then he paid them the just price for what they had written ; but, as à Kempis tells us—and the same plan seems to have been continued in his day too—Gerard did not usually pay them the whole at once, but distributed part of it at a time, so that they might have the excuse of frequently coming to him, and having access to him for the payment of their money, when he took the opportunity of impressing upon them the value and beauty of a holy life, and exhorting them to give themselves to Christ their Lord and Saviour. And, adds à Kempis, in proportion as they willingly listened to the teaching of the Master so much the more did they seem to increase and abound in beneficent acts of piety. Gerard delighted to speak thus intimately more to the simple-minded and to those who were teachable, than to the wise of this world ; because the innocent and needy were for the most part more quickly admitted to the counsels of God, than the sagacious who trusted in their own wisdom.<sup>1</sup>

Gerard had been a great advocate for earnest Christians associating and banding themselves together in companies ; and he advised many of those who had been convinced by

<sup>1</sup> *Vita Gerardi*, ix. sec. 2.

his preaching and had turned to Christ, to live together if they were single, and could conveniently do so, in one house for mutual help, comfort, and encouragement. He had regard also to the younger women, and purchased a house for them at Deventer where they might live together, and where they were to learn to employ their time usefully in spinning, weaving, sewing, and other women's work, till called to occupy places in the world. These persons were to call themselves *Brothers* and *Sisters*: and were to be sure to earn their livelihood by the work of their own hands. He would suffer none to beg at the doors of better people, or to go from house to house out of curiosity; but persuaded them to stay at home and mind their own business, according to the apostolic rule: and it must further be observed that though he urged them to engage heartily in whatever work they undertook, and do it to the best of their ability, he would have none of them to attend to their external work or duties in such a way that it would be a hindrance to their devotions, and their service to Christ.

Similar institutions to those which Gerard had commenced at Deventer sprung up also at Zwolle and Campen. At the latter place, the magistrates and citizens had taken an unworthy part in the confusion and scandal caused by the mendicant friars, and on account of the penance to which one of their order had to submit; for being incited against the friends and followers of Gerard, several of the inhabitants harassed them with many indignities, and committed grievous injuries upon them, dispossessing them of their goods, and expelling certain of them from the city. Among these was the rector of the school at Campen, Werner Keynkamp of Locken, who afterwards was made the first prior of the convent at Windesheim, whom they publicly led forth from the town with much opprobrium, which he patiently suffered for the cause of Christ, and the truth of the orthodox faith.<sup>1</sup> Upon hearing this, the in-

<sup>1</sup> Buschius, *Chron. Windes.* I. ch. iv. p. 18.

trepid Gerard wrote to Keynkamp as follows:—‘I hope you will face with equanimity the danger of losing your temporal substance. The Saints did this. Earthly dangers are nothing, when we fix our eyes upon the celestial recompense. Let us rejoice that in some measure we are crucified to the world, or have crucified the world to us. Ours is a just and sacred cause. May it be to some of us the means of obtaining the Crown!’<sup>1</sup>

Gerard gave much attention to the settling and perfecting of these communities, and extending them to other places. But there were two matters which he seems to have especially taken in hand, when not permitted to preach. The first was the obtaining as correct a Translation of the Holy Scriptures as he possibly could. He was a great lover of the Bible, and had, as we have seen, endeavoured to extend the knowledge of its sacred truths, not only by his preaching, but by employing writers to multiply copies of it, and then spreading them abroad; and now he was anxious to have a carefully corrected copy of that blessed Word, which should be the one from which all their copies should be taken. For this purpose he procured the best manuscripts from the neighbouring abbeys and collegiate churches, with others brought from a distance, and with a version of the Bible by St. Jerome, he set in operation the collation, correction, and introduction of a more perfect Latin translation; and in doing this he obtained the aid of other learned men, the which was carried on, and brought to a completion by them after his death.

In the second place, he further occupied himself in maturing a plan for establishing a religious Order of Canons Regular, to spring up from among ‘the Brothers of Common Life,’ who should lead a more strict and secluded life, and be a protection to those who remained as before free from formal and irrevocable vows. It was his design also that the new Order should be a model of what the monastic life should be, as founded on the pattern and rule

<sup>1</sup> *Revis Daventria Illus.* pp. 31, 32.

of more primitive times, keeping in view the original design of those who separated from the world in this manner, in order that they might give themselves more entirely to God's service, the care of their own souls, and the welfare of those about them in the world. As à Kempis after leaving Deventer joined one of these reformed monasteries, and became a Canon Regular, I shall enter into further particulars respecting them, as a higher society or institution of 'the Brothers of Common Life,' in a future chapter. The idea of founding such a religious Order seems to have suggested itself first to Gerard's mind after he had paid a visit to Ruysbroek at the Monastery of Grünthal. It appears that he had gone to see this venerable saint of God, during the period of the inhibition. He wanted a short time to calm his soul, to review his position, to consider his future course of action, as well as to consult with this man of God upon spiritual matters, and to receive counsel from him. It was indeed a journey of some consequence to him, and helped to determine his future course.

Taking with him an intimate friend, who was of one heart and soul with himself, as we have before stated, John Cele, the worthy rector of the school at Zwolle, and accompanied by a devout layman, called by Thomas à Kempis, Gerard Calopifex, who acted as their guide, they went to see Ruysbroek. Coming to the place where he lived, named the Verdant Valley (*Viridis Vallis*), they did not behold a large and splendid edifice, but an abode significant of simplicity and poverty, which were the first marks of our heavenly King when He came upon earth. Having entered the gate of the monastery, they soon saw the holy father and devout prior. He was of a great age, affable, serene, and of a reverend aspect; and coming to meet them, he saluted them most benignly, and, as if by some intuitive knowledge vouchsafed unto him, he at once recognised Gerard, and called him by his proper name, though he had never seen him before. Having welcomed them, he led them as most honoured guests into the interior of the monastery, and offered to them the rights of hospitality



with a cheerful countenance and most expansive heart, as if he had received Jesus Christ Himself.<sup>1</sup>

Gerard remained with him several days; and conferring with this man of God concerning the Holy Scriptures, he heard from him many heavenly secrets; so that being astonished he could say with the Queen of Sheba, 'Thy wisdom and knowledge (O excellent father) is greater than the report which I heard in my own country, for thou exceedest thy fame in virtues.'<sup>2</sup> There were certain things which it is said that Gerard never forgot, and which he frequently ruminated upon afterwards. Ruysbroek was as one who lived continually in the presence and love of God, holding communion with Him at all times, as if pervaded with the Spirit, and doing all things, walking, talking, writing, and performing even the commonest things, as if he were endued and guided from on high. Thus he said to Gerard, 'I am firmly convinced that I have not written a single word, except under the impulse of the Holy Spirit, and in the special and gracious presence of the Holy Trinity.' On another occasion, Gerard having alluded to the pains of hell, the fervour of Divine love blazed forth in Ruysbroek with unusual strength, and he cried out, 'I know for certain that I am ready to endure all that God

<sup>1</sup> Thom. à Kemp., *Vita Gerardi*, x. 2.

<sup>2</sup> An English clergyman visiting, some twenty-five years ago, the spot where Ruysbroek was born, thus briefly alludes to the pious saint and his influence:— 'It was on a fine August evening that I visited the little village of Ruysbroek, the birthplace of the "ecstatic Doctor." The singularly uneventful annals of the life of John de Ruysbroek, peaceful and lovely in the midst of a turbulent and luxurious generation, were not, I thought, ill typified by the sunshiny repose of that little Belgian hamlet, so near the din and turmoil of a corrupt metropolis. Long after he was considered the first ascetic divine of his age, John contented himself with the post of a vicar in the collegiate church of St. Gudule, in Brussels, whence he was the director of all the communities, far and near, that were most distinguished for holiness and discipline. He was the reformer of the Abbey of St. Severin, near Château Laudun; mediately, it is believed, of the great convent of Rhynsberg, and of the collegiate church of Groenen-dael (Val-Vert), where the last years of his life were spent. But what his influence must have been is rather gathered from the tone taken at once by all his scholars—that intense love to God, that overwhelming devotion to the Passion, which characterised the mystic school of Holland, from Ruysbroek himself to De Neercassel.'—Neale's *Jansenist Church of Holland*, p. 68.

allots to me, life or death, or even the torments of hell.' The parts of his character which most astonished Gerard were the complete mortification and deadness of his self-love, and the perfect concord of his will with God's. Gerard wrote afterwards to the Brethren in Grünthal that he had never loved or honoured any mortal man so warmly as their Prior, and that he was willing to serve him for a footstool both in the present life and in that which is to come. At the same time he expressed the liveliest desire and longing for the company of his friends there, in order to refresh and invigorate himself by imbibing their spirit.<sup>1</sup>

Thomas à Kempis tells us that one of the practical results of this visit to Ruysbroek, was the determination he came to, to found a monastery of the Order of Canons Regular for the Brothers of Common Life; being wishful that of those who adhered to him some of the most likely should be promoted to the religious habit, that they might be an example to the other devotees, and shew the way of a good conversation in Christ to the clerics and laics coming to them from other places. He was chiefly led to institute this Order of Regulars on account of the singular reverence and love that he bore to Ruysbroek and the Brethren of that Order who dwelt with him, and from observing the simple, social, edifying life they led in the Verdant Valley. A family spirit reigned among them, and put them all upon a level.<sup>2</sup> Ruysbroek, although the Prior, executed the humblest offices, while, on the other hand, those brothers, whose duties related to external things, as, for instance, John the Cook,<sup>3</sup> were treated as friends, and taken into

<sup>1</sup> *Vita Gerardi*, Thom. à Kemp. x. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> This man, named *Johannes Affliginiensis*, was an uneducated layman, who besides practising his calling, lived in the observance of the most rigid ascetic rules, and constant spiritual contemplation. He frequently gave lessons and admonitions on Divine things to the Canons. For an account of him see Engelhardt's *Ruysbroek*, s. 326, and Ullmann's *Reformers*, &c. John Cacabus or Ketel, cook of the Brother-house at Deventer, seems to have been such another man of like spirit, though a more educated man, of whose life Thomas à Kempis gives us a sketch, to which we shall shortly draw attention.

consultation in all spiritual affairs. The Canons of Grünthal realized the idea of a true Brotherhood upon the highest Christian principles. The remembrance of this remained indelible on the soul of Gerard, and was obviously his guiding star in his design of instituting the Order of Canons Regular in connection with, and out of the Brothers of Common Life.

On leaving Ruysbroek, Gerard, in company with Cele, extended his journey to Paris, and there expended a considerable sum in the purchase of manuscripts which would be useful to the clerks, and would serve to further his efforts to gain a more correct version of the Holy Scriptures than they had at that time.

After visiting one or two other places he returned to Deventer, and threw his whole soul anew into the various works of piety and charity which he still superintended and infused life into, though during this period he was debarred from preaching; especially did he delight in selecting, befriending, and training young people for a devout life, and preparing some to become zealous ministers in the Church of God. He did not, however, forget his resolution to found a monastery of Canons Regular, for it was now ever uppermost in his mind, and he set to work and selected the place which he thought would be a suitable site for a religious House. Yet the building was not proceeded with at once. He had already spent and employed his ample fortune in carrying on those acts of usefulness and devotion, which had so much engaged his soul, and now he seemed to lack the means for carrying out this additional work which he longed to accomplish. But while waiting, and trusting that Providence would open the way and provide means for its accomplishment, a strange ordering of events led to it. The terrible Plague broke out in Deventer, and he at once busied himself in giving diligent attendance on the stricken, ministering fearlessly both to their bodily comforts and to their spiritual welfare. One day whilst thus employed, word was brought to him that a faithful, pious, and wealthy friend of his, Lambert

Stuerman, had been seized with the raging pestilence ; and Gerard, who was not inexperienced in the art of medicine, hastened intrepidly to his side for the purpose of administering consolation and help. And Gerard felt more especially the necessity of going to him when he sent, and most pressinglly asked him to come, since he had expressed himself as desirous to follow Gerard's counsel in the making of his will ; and the consequence of this was that the dying man left and bequeathed a large sum of money for at once founding a monastery for a new community of Canons Regular, according to Gerard's directions.

Here then was the very object of Gerard's earnest wish within sight of being realised ; but, as it has happened in many other like cases—such are the mysterious ways of Providence—he himself was taken away before it could be accomplished. Nay, no sooner was he conscious that the prayer of his soul had been granted, than God called him hence. He himself took the plague from attending his friend ; and, as it is recorded, he felt the pestilential poison gradually stealing up through the nerves and veins of his fingers till it affected him inwardly, and up through his arms till it reached his chest, and was thus surely creeping to his vital parts. Therefore, seeing that his end was come, he returned to his house, and called all the devout Fathers together—Florentius the Rector, and the rest of the Clerks (*clerici*) and Brethren of the Congregation at Deventer ; and as they stood around him, he told them that his dissolution was nigh at hand, because he felt from the virulency of the corrupting poison in his system that he could not possibly recover. He bore his sufferings with great patience. He asked for and received the Holy Sacrament ; and after speaking further about his departure, the dying reformer said, 'God grant that I may find rest after my death, since for the love of Him I have laboured, written, and preached.'<sup>1</sup>

Seeing and hearing these things, they who stood around him were all sorely distressed, and with wounded hearts

<sup>1</sup> Thom. à Kemp., *Vita Gerardi*, cap. xvi. I.



they sobbed aloud ; with tears and lamentations they also cried out, 'Oh much beloved Master, oh most faithful Father and protector, what shall we do in the future ? To whom shall we turn when thou art taken from us ? For the devotion of the whole country, which was revived by thee, and began to flourish again under the wings of thy protection, will die when thou art gone. For every one will necessarily return to his own way by the which he came, when we have no one to defend us against those that rise up against us, or to fight for us. Those mendicants will drive us from the land, and they will vex our lives with the worst injuries they can do against us, when there is no one to withstand them, and close their wicked mouths.' <sup>1</sup> And here we shall continue the account of his last moments in the touching words of Thomas à Kempis.

The pious and compassionate Master, seeing the grief of his sons at the thought of his departure, consoled them, and exhorted them thus :—

'Have faith in God, most beloved, and do not fear the reproaches of worldly men. Remain steadfast in your holy resolution ; the Lord will be with you in this place. For man will not be able to overthrow that which God has decreed to accomplish. . . . And behold there is Florentius, my beloved disciple. in whom verily the Holy Spirit rests : he shall be your Father and ruler. Hold him in my place, hear him, and obey his counsel.' And having thus kindly consoled his disciples, who were greatly overcome with much sorrow, he assured them that the help of God would be with them. To these he left in his will, not gold or silver or abundance of treasures, but the sacred books, and some very poor garments, and certain other common and antiquated articles, marks of his contempt of the world, and of his endeavour to attain the kingdom of God. After this there came to him certain devout scholars who were smitten with the pestilence, desiring, for the remedy of their souls, to hear some salutary words from him. To whom he kindly replied, 'If you have always a good design to serve God, you may die securely. All the lessons which ye have learnt shall be reckoned to you as the Lord's Prayer, on account of the pious intention towards God, which you had in studying.' Hearing these words the young men were consoled ;

<sup>1</sup> Buschius, *Chron. Windes.* i. ch. iv. 19–21.

and returning to their lodgings, they died in a good confession, commending their souls, redeemed through the Blood of Christ, to God and the holy angels. And thus after the day of the Assumption of the Blessed and ever Virgin Mary, when the Festival of St. Bernard was come, the venerable Father Master Gerard, who had a special devotion to St. Bernard, having been fortified with the Sacrament of the Church—yielded up to God his soul, rendered precious through faith, and illustrious for many virtues, just as it was drawing on towards evening between the hours of five and six, in the year of our Lord's Incarnation one thousand three hundred and eighty-four.<sup>1</sup>

When the sad tidings of his death went forth among the people, multitudes of the faithful assembled to honour the burial of so loving and devout a Master; and the religious Brothers and Sisters shed many tears. He was interred with great solemnity in the Church of St. Mary, which had frequently rung with his loving voice when he preached the Word of God.<sup>2</sup>

Thomas à Kempis gives us in few words some traits of this faithful servant of Christ, which will afford us, in passing, a glimpse of what he was, both as regards the outward and inner man. He had, he tells us, a cheerful countenance and serene mind; he was affable in conversation, modest in his bearing, sagacious in counsel, severe towards vice, and ardent in doing good. He eschewed sloth, loved simplicity, contented himself usually with one meal in the day. He was unwilling to accept invitations.<sup>3</sup> He was very fervent and devout in prayer; and often when he read the 'Hours,' from the superabundant infusion of grace, he

<sup>1</sup> *Vita Gerardi*, xvi. 2, 3, 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* xvi. 5. Foppeus says that in the year 1697, when demolishing the walls of the old Brother-house at Deventer, Gerard's skull, together with that of Florentius, is said to have been found (*Bibl. Belg.* i. 356). Neale, however, states that his skull was found in the same year, 1697, in the church of Deventer, and removed in a chest to the Fraterhuis at Emmerik. It is difficult to know how to reconcile these two statements, or which to depend upon the most. The skull was easily known, says Neale, from the remarkable orifice in the bones of the forehead, which was noticeable even in his lifetime, and which he used playfully to call his chimney (*Jansenist Church*, p. 81).

<sup>3</sup> *Vita Gerardi*, xi.

would burst forth with a voice of jubilation, disclosing the internal gladness of his heart in the sweet song of praise which he uttered. And every morning before he undertook any external business, or gave any answer to inquiries, he refreshed himself with sacred readings; and endeavoured seasonably to prepare himself for his future duties by devout meditation and prayer. And when he entered the church often would he seek a quiet place, where he could not be disturbed in his prayers by the tumult of men, and would prostrate himself before God; and there with in-treaties and sighs he would knock at the gate of heaven, and beating his breast with the publican, he would implore God to be propitious to him, and not suffer him to perish.<sup>1</sup>

Buschius speaks of Master Gerard as 'the first Father of our Reformation,' and says that to him was owing all 'the Modern Devotion.'<sup>2</sup>

Though he was not one to openly stir up disaffection in the Church, he nevertheless was of opinion that a radical change was needed in the existing system under papal domination. For writing to his friend William de Salvavillâ, Gerard says, 'The decadence of the Church is visible in everything. The ruin of the whole body of the Church has been a long time threatened. . . .

'We suffer especially in the chief—the Pope; for following the doctrine of the physicians, the disorder of the head is the symptom of a grave malady, and one effect is a fever which ravages the whole organism. We are like inexperienced physicians; we see the actual signs of the evil without having regard to the older symptoms, which are not less important. Thus we lean entirely on one side, whilst the present suffering is not the principal cause of the decline. I hold indisputably that the luminaries of the Church must be overthrown because of the cupidity and luxury of the Ecclesiastics. This schism will not be cured without leaving a large scar . . . . and I, who desire the return of the unity of the Church, I wish that the two rival popes were in heaven to sing the *Gloria in excelsis*; and

<sup>1</sup> *Vita Gerardi*, xii.

<sup>2</sup> *Chron. Windes.* pp. 2, 19, 326.

that a veritable Eliakim would descend upon earth, who would not be of this same race of vipers. But this present hour is the hour of darkness. May God deliver us from the evil! Amen.’<sup>1</sup>

Now these words are remarkable as written by Gerard Groote forty years before the Council of Constance. He was loyal and stern in upholding the doctrines and discipline of the Church, but he prognosticated a century and a half before Luther that the schism was irremediable without a reformation of the Church ‘in its chief and its members.’ He was indeed, like Wickliff, ‘a precursor of the Reformation.’ There is indeed a great resemblance between him and Wickliff. Gerard performed in Holland and Gelderland an analogous part to what Wickliff performed in England. Both were declared enemies of the mendicant Orders, and of the abuses of the Church of Rome. Both were advocates of voluntary poverty and of preaching the Gospel to the people in the vulgar tongue. Both died in the same year, and both were the victims of the coalition of parties interested in the retention of abuses. Wickliff employed many poor clergy in Evangelizing the people, and Gerard Groote in a similar manner raised up and assisted many poor clerics to spread the Gospel. Wickliff, however, had the more critical and Scriptural spirit, whilst Gerard exhibited a moral and mystical tendency. One relies on the texts of Scripture to encounter the corruptions of the Romish Church; and does not fear to batter down many of its errors. Gerard still respects many of the dogmas, and the pontifical authority, but appeals to the example of the Life of Christ and His Apostles, and invokes the testimony of the Holy Spirit within us, for effecting a reformation of abuses and vices in the Church.

Here an interesting question arises as to whether these two forerunners of the Reformation, and awakeners of the religious conscience,—preaching at the same time in two neighbouring countries, having commercial and intellectual

<sup>1</sup> See Manuscripts at the Hague, No. 154, fols. 115, 165, and 230; G. Bonet-Maury, *G. G.* pp. 38, 39.



relations,—were strangers one to the other. We have in vain, says one who has examined the question, sought in the writings of Gerard Groote for a trace of the ideas of Wickliff; and reciprocally we have not found in the writings of Wickliff any mention of Gerard. There is, however, a striking analogy in their methods of Evangelizing, and in their return to the Primitive Church as the standard of what Christianity should be. But how explain this identity of results with perfect independence of research? May it not arise from the effect of a general law of the human mind that is called the law of the simultaneous dawn of truth? The moral and natural truths are like organic germs which are placed by the Creator in divers places, and when the time fixed by the Divine Wisdom has arrived they simultaneously come to light in the souls of two or three men of genius. It has been so in Mathematics, Astronomy, and Chemistry. Why should it not be so in the moral and religious world, since one and the same God governs the body and the mind; only the orbit of human reason is more difficult to determine? <sup>1</sup>

In drawing this sketch of Gerard Groote's life to a close, we would notice that Thomas à Kempis has collected together, at the end of his biography of him, several of his most valued moral Sayings and Rules of Life.<sup>2</sup> They are not only characteristic of the man and his teaching, but serve to shew the practical nature of the mysticism he adopted, free from the errors which sometimes clung to it. Ullmann says of Gerard, that 'having received the impulse from John Ruysbroek, he transplanted the spirit to his favourite disciple Florentius, and he in his turn to Thomas à Kempis. And in the maxims he cites it is impossible not to recognise the school from which the book "Of the Imitation of Christ" has proceeded; and it must be evident to every one who contemplates the movements of that age and circle, that Thomas à Kempis was but a link in a great chain of evolutions, that he trained himself

<sup>1</sup> Bonet-Maury, *Gérard de Groote un Précurseur de la Réforme*, pp. 88, 89.

<sup>2</sup> *Vita Gerardi*, xviii.

according to an existing school and tradition, and that his blossoms derived their sap from a stock whose roots were Ruysbroek and Gerard Groote.<sup>1</sup>

I have already dwelt sufficiently long on the life of Gerard, and do not feel justified in giving a selection of these maxims, however valuable and instructive they may be. I therefore now pass on to give some particulars respecting the origin and history of the Confraternities to which Thomas à Kempis belonged, in the furtherance and labour of which he took part and felt the deepest interest so long as he lived. There were two stems, as it were, growing out of one stock. I must notice first that more unfettered branch of the Association which was first established, and which was generally termed 'The Brothers of Common Life.' Those who were afterwards associated together in a religious Order and called Canons Regular, were considered a higher grade of the same Brotherhood, and under vows. I must deal with these later on, when I come to speak of the time when à Kempis entered one of their monasteries.

<sup>1</sup> *Reformers before the Reformation*, ii. pp. 79, 80.

## CHAPTER VI.

How the Society of the Brothers of Common Life originated—Rules for the regulation of it drawn up by Florentius under the advice of Gerard—How the Society differed from the Monastic Life—Something like to the Society of these Brothers previously existed—The mode of life pursued by the Beguines, Beghards, Lollards—How these bodies had mostly degenerated—The Brothers of Common Life designed for a reformation of religion—Various safeguards for the preservation of their purity and usefulness—The part they took in promoting Education and the Advancement of Learning—The Study of the Scriptures encouraged, the Fathers and the Lives of the Saints read—The Brothers are persecuted by the Mendicant Friars—Gerard stands forth in their defence—A Kempis commends this kind of life in one of his Discourses.

THE commencement of 'the Brothers of Common Life,' as a Confraternity, was in a very simple and natural way. It seemed to grow out of the necessities of the case. There was a call for it. A combination of those who were piously disposed and like-minded was not only desirable but needed for their mutual support, for their encouragement and edification, and for the keeping up a certain rule and discipline of life. Gerard, as we have seen, had a special liking for the society of young men. Several of his most intimate acquaintances were young clerics of great piety and moral earnestness, who frequently shared in his devotional exercises and apostolic wanderings.<sup>1</sup> And it has been already stated, how interested he was in promoting the advancement of promising youths whom he found at the public schools; and how a great number of those who were destined for the clerical profession, attached themselves to Gerard; who on his part, when requested, advised them about the prosecution of their studies, discussed scientific subjects with them, read good books to them, discoursed

<sup>1</sup> Thom. à Kemp., *Vita Gerardi*, xii. 1.

with them in a friendly way upon the Life of Christ, advised them about their own personal manner of life, entertained many of them at his table, and procured for those who were poor the opportunity of earning a little money.

This latter object was accomplished, as we know, by getting them to copy books, which was at that time a matter of some moment, when there was no printing press in existence; and, as there was an increasing demand for such works, it afforded employment of a very honourable sort to young men who qualified themselves for it. Thomas à Kempis tells us that Gerard had a great love for the Holy Scriptures, which he diligently read every morning in private, and for the writings of the ancient Fathers, and that he was indefatigable in collecting the records of Christian antiquity.<sup>1</sup> He was, as he himself states in a letter to a friend, 'avaricious—and more than avaricious—of good books.' It was not for the mere external beauty of a fine handwriting that he cared, but for what he read in these writings; still he was very urgent in requiring that the Holy Scriptures, and other useful works, should be well written, and carefully preserved from dust and ill-usage, so that they might be more extensively useful to the present and future generations.<sup>2</sup> He recommended that the Sacred Scriptures and the Divine Offices should be written in a larger or better style than that used for other works, both for the honour of God, and for the service of the Church. This was afterwards carried out by Thomas à Kempis in writing the Bible and the two Missals, as the facsimile of one of the latter written in 1417 shews. In thus employing these young men, he had a threefold end in view,—to multiply good books,—to afford profitable employment for supporting poor students,—and to gain the opportunity of influencing their minds for a holy life. This he continued to do more and more; and as the numbers increased it became necessary to consider how they should all be provided for, and whether some other system could not be brought into operation, whereby those

<sup>1</sup> Thom. à Kemp., *Vita Gerardi*, xiii. 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* xiii. 2.



who were engaged in these labours might not in some measure co-operate in mutually helping to raise the means for their own maintenance, and at the same time whether more fixed regulations could not be adopted for living on strictly Scriptural principles and after the pattern of the primitive Christians.

The suggestion of a Brotherhood, however, did not come from Gerard in the first instance, though he had brought all matters together, ready for it. It originated simply enough in this way. The number of copyists had increased: and consequently expenses had also increased: so on a certain occasion, when Gerard was anxiously considering how he should provide necessary food and clothing for all those who were thus disposed to employ their time, Master Florentius Radewin, who had been converted by Gerard, and since then had become one of the vicars of Deventer, made a proposition by chance, as it would appear, to him in these terms, saying: 'Beloved master, what harm will arise if these clerics (*clerici*) engaged in writing, and I, should, with a good will, place the amount which we earn in one common purse, to expend as needed, and live equally alike in common?' 'In a Community? In a Community?' again inquired Gerard; 'that would be like the Order of Mendicants, and they would not tolerate it, but would endeavour to resist it with all their power; and it would set them altogether in opposition to us.' To which Florentius replied, 'But what is to prevent us making the trial? Perhaps God might vouchsafe to us that which would be to our advantage.' Then Master Gerard deliberated a little while within himself, says the Chronicler of Windesheim, and at last said, 'In God's name, then, let us begin. I will be your advocate and your faithful protector against all the adversaries that shall rise up against you and try to hinder you.'<sup>1</sup> Receiving his permission to make the attempt, therefore, and such a consolatory promise of support, the devout Florentius gathered the young clerics together, and made the proposal to them, whether they would be willing to place the price

<sup>1</sup> Buschius, *Chron. Windes.* vol. i. ch. ii. pp. 6, 7.

which they each received weekly for what they wrote into one common fund, and live a common life together, in the name of God. To this they readily assented with unwonted gladness of soul, and with the felicity of those who rejoice in prosperous times.

Moreover, continues the Chronicler, some of the clerics,<sup>1</sup> who had talked about this matter aforetime, considered this Common Life to be the way of perfection, sanctioned by the Apostles in the primitive age of the Church, and under the government of the Holy Ghost, when among all those that concurred in the same Christian faith there was but one heart ; neither did any one call the things that he possessed his own (Acts ii. 32-34). Moreover they conceived that in the Gospels they had a further promise from Christ, that by relinquishing all desire of gain for themselves in this life, and following Christ, they should receive an hundredfold, and inherit Eternal Life (St. Matt. xix. 29). And since, by their associating together in a community of this sort, what was necessary for their subsistence would be provided for, and would be likely to afford them more quiet and a blessed peace of mind, they were the more ready of their own free will to enter upon the proposed project ; and so after having well considered the matter they all came to the unanimous decision that by the help, counsel, and protection of Gerard they would remain all the days of their life as ' Brothers of the Common Life,' under obedience to Florentius, as their head ; although no vow or solemn promise should be exacted from any of them, but all should agree to contribute by the unwearied labours of their own hands, particularly by writing, what was necessary for the support of the community in providing food, clothing, and other necessities of life.

And having once begun to live together in holy Brother-

<sup>1</sup> I think it may be better to use this term for them in future, to distinguish them from others ; for they were not spoken of as *clerici* because they were clergymen in the sense of ordained ministers, nor clerks merely as we understand the word when applied to a secular calling. They were strictly writers, copiers of books, but still closely allied to religion, so that they were esteemed as a semi-religious body.

hood, by the favour of God, and the good will of their neighbours and relations, whose hearts God had inclined, and being mutually affectionate towards each other, many joined them, not only clerics, but laymen of divers positions, of their own free pleasure, being ardently drawn by their earnest words and holy examples, to the love of God and a contempt of the world.<sup>1</sup>

Then the devout Father Florentius, dwelling with his priests and clerics in common life, prescribed, by the counsel of Master Gerard, the form and rules of living alike in their Community,—the modes, places, and times of labouring, watching, sleeping, praying, reading, and refreshing the body; and how other matters concerning their welfare should be settled for the time to come. Having then fully and wisely established themselves, and being joined together in holy concord, they furnished to the whole religious world, says the writer from whose work these particulars are derived, to both men and women living in the world also, the pattern of Apostolic life, and a complete example of Evangelical perfection, so that the eyes of all men were fixed upon them with astonishment, since their lives were renowned for their sanctity.

After this manner therefore, and from this beginning, all the devout Congregations of Priests and Clerics, and of the Sisters now spread abroad throughout the greater part of Germany, are well known to have taken their rise. For when in divers cities, towns, and villages many priests and clerics, virgins and widows, men and women of all conditions, for the love of the heavenly country, most willingly left parents, brothers, relations, and acquaintances, their business, their gains, their advantages, and all that they had in this world,—they desired with their whole hearts perpetually to be the servants of the Lord Jesus Christ, Who became poor on account of their poverty, and to live in true obedience, chastity, and poverty, after the manner of the devout congregations of Brothers and Sisters; faithfully serving God day and night, and glorifying Him according

<sup>1</sup> Buschius, *Chron. Windes.* ch. ii. pp. 7, 8.

to the rule of Christ ; but without any professed rule—i.e. without making any solemn vow like the monks and nuns.<sup>1</sup>

Now from these particulars it must not be thought that there had been no institutions before this time of a like character except the Carthusian, Franciscan, and other monasteries, where the members lived together under vows. There was indeed a certain kind of kinship to the monastic institution then existing, but they differed from them in this essential respect, that the Brothers of Common Life were left free to go or stay ; for if any of the Brothers repented of their having adopted such a life, and it became irksome to them, or they were inclined to rebel against authority, they were at liberty to take their departure ; and further, they seemed animated with a purer faith in Christ, earnestly desiring to follow Him in cheerful godliness. Something similar, however, to the constitution of 'the Brothers of Common Life' may be found in history nearly two hundred and fifty years before they were established.

About the middle of the twelfth century, says an observant writer, and particularly in Upper Italy, France, the Netherlands, and in Germany, the stirrings of spiritual life manifested themselves in various ways, and began to be deeply felt among the nations of the West ; while efforts,

<sup>1</sup> Buschius, *Chron. Windes.* ch. ii. pp. 8, 9. Butler in his *Lives of the Saints*, speaking (in St. Andrew Avellius's life) of St. Charles Borromeo says, 'That great saint had nothing so much at heart as such a reformation of the clergy, that all amongst them might be replenished with the spirit of the Apostles. For this end so many Orders of Regular Canons and Clerks have been instituted from St. Augustine [down to our time. Yet into our Houses, through the negligence of superiors and the propensity of the human heart to the gratification of its passions, the spirit of the world has too often found admittance, to the gratification of the scandal. For the same purpose have congregations of secular clergy, living in common without vows, been sometimes erected : amongst which scarcely any was more famous than that of Windesheim, established by Gerard the Great or Groot, in Holland, who died in the odour of sanctity in 1384, leaving his plan to be finished by his worthy successor Dr. Florentius : it was continued in the same spirit by John Cacabus or Kettle.\* St. Charles Borromeo had a design of engaging his canons to live in this manner in common without vows, but the execution was prevented by his death.' Nov. 10, vol. ii. pp. 840-1.

\* Here Butler is in error, for John Kettle died before Florentius. See *Lives*, by T. à Kempis.



originating in a real inward want, were made to call again into existence the Christianity of the intellect, the heart, and the life, with its apostolic simplicity, charity, and self-denial. The persons, whether male or female, who caught the infection of this spirit, were forced, by the corruptions prevailing both in society and in the Church, to seek for themselves a quiet retreat, where, in seclusion from the world, they might enjoy the blessedness of inward peace, and remain connected with their fellow men by no bond except that of good will and beneficence. Originally this also had been the end and aim of Monachism. Eventually, however, the Monasteries had become involved in the general degeneracy, often to an extent of which it is horrible to think. The monks themselves were oftentimes both the most corrupt of men, and the worst corrupters of the age. And yet it is no uncommon thing to discover, side by side with the deepest debasement, the most vigorous efforts to rise, just as the sanitary virtue operates most powerfully upon the organ most affected by disease. Accordingly we find a double result.

In the first place, many truly great, serious, energetic Christian characters were produced in the very domain of monachism ; while by whole monastic communities, or at least a large part of them, the purest objects of Christianity were strenuously promoted ; as, for instance, the culture of a deeper and more heartfelt piety by the Augustinians,—the vindication of the liberty of the Church by a part of the Franciscans,—and the practice of a higher, though sometimes over-strained severity of morals by the Cistercians and Carthusians ; so that, in the very worst corruption of monachism, the operation of a conservative power for good is to be observed. In the second place, although monachism as a whole had now degenerated from its original condition, there grew up besides it something new, and nearly allied to it, which strove, by a purer and freer method, to realize that for which the monastic communities were originally designed, but which they were now no longer able to effect. I here speak of those peculiar

religious associations of the middle ages, which partially wore the outward form of the monastic life, but were exempt from its restraints and connection with the hierarchy, and animated by a more intense and profound Christian spirit. Through the greater part of the middle ages a succession of free spiritual associations can be traced, which being often oppressed and persecuted by ecclesiastical dignitaries, pertained rather to the life of the people, than to the frame-work of the Church,—exhibited more or less a regulated form, and professed a diversity of doctrines, though they all emanated from a fundamental endeavour after practical Christianity.

First there arose in the Netherlands, as early as the eleventh century, partly owing to the disproportion between the sexes produced by the Crusades, the female society of the Beguines. Then in the thirteenth century we hear of the Beghards—male communities. And then in the following century, and at first around Antwerp, appeared the Lollards. The Tertiaries of St. Francis had commonly the former of these terms applied to them. And the ‘Brethren of the Free Spirit’—generally pure-minded mystics—were known under the same appellation, though later on they were often designated Lollards.<sup>1</sup> All of them rapidly spread; and, in many localities, attracted much attention; as, for instance, the Beguines, who became very numerous in Cologne.<sup>2</sup> These ‘prayer-makers and chanters’—for such is probably the most correct interpretation of the words Beghards and Lollards<sup>3</sup>—devoted their attention wholly to practical objects. For the most part they lived together in separate houses of their own, with the utmost simplicity; supported by the earnings of their manual industry and by charitable donations, and were chiefly occupied by works of Christian benevolence.

In these labours they not only manifested blamelessness

<sup>1</sup> Mosheim, *Cent. III.* p. ii. ch. v.

<sup>2</sup> In A.D. 1250 there were upwards of a thousand in this city.

<sup>3</sup> Mosheim says that ‘the word Lollard means a *singer*, as Beghard means one who *prays*.’ *Cent. XIV.* p. ii. ch. ii.

of life, but did great good. They were therefore beloved by the people, gladly received in the towns, protected by princes and magistrates ; and after a temporary suppression under Clement V., in the year 1311, they were even sanctioned by several Popes,<sup>1</sup> so long as they adhered strictly to the creeds of the Church, and taught no heresy. The Inquisitors and mendicant monks were the only parties who opposed them, and here and there succeeded in stirring up persecution against them ; though the clergy generally did not look upon them with favour, as they were the means of drawing away from them part of their customary dues. Many families of distinction also were displeased with the Beguine establishments, as threatening to divert the more pious of their daughters from married life. This opposition, however, would have done these establishments little harm. Their own inward declension, which followed in the course of time, injured them most of all.<sup>2</sup>

The object and rule of all these religious associations at the first were similar to those of 'the Brothers and Sisters of Common Life,' and were alike serious, practical, and praiseworthy. None but women of good character were admitted among the Beguines. They took no oath binding for life, but were required solemnly to promise obedience and chastity. Great strictness of life was maintained ; and any refractory conduct was punished with stripes or imprisonment, and the licentious were dismissed. All dressed alike, and took their meals at one common table ; they all assembled at fixed hours for prayer and exhortation, and the rest of the day was actively spent in manual labour, and caring for the poor and sick. Each of the sisters had a separate cell, but there was one common sleeping and dining apartment for all.

The communities of the Beghards and the Lollards were carried on in like manner, and they often associated

<sup>1</sup> By John XXII. in 1318 ; by Gregory XI. in 1374 and 1377 ; by Sixtus IV. in 1472 ; and Julius II. in 1506.

<sup>2</sup> Ullmann, *Reformers before the Reformation*, ii. 9-15.

together to nurse those attacked with dangerous sickness, and to bury the dead.<sup>1</sup>

Many of these religious associations were still in existence and held in much esteem at the time when the Societies of the 'Brothers and Sisters of Common Life' were first instituted; and it seems very probable that the disciples of Gerard gained their first idea of living together, and were incited to do so, from the knowledge they had of these associations. Gregory XI. in 1377 recognises these Beghards and Lollards as living honestly and humbly together, in pureness of faith, decently clad, but poor and chaste, and as they devoutly frequented the services of the Church he would not suffer them to be persecuted.<sup>2</sup> Boniface IX. also in 1394 especially commends them in this, 'that they receive into their domiciles the poor and wretched, and to the utmost of their power practise other works of charity, inasmuch as when required they visit and wait upon the sick, and minister to their wants, and attend also to the burying of the dead.'<sup>3</sup> The Beghards and Lollards, therefore, of this description had consequently nothing singular, schismatic, or sectarian about them; on the contrary, in connection with the Church, they performed the same duties which are now undertaken by the Sisters of Mercy, and other like benevolent associations.

But alas! as is so often the case, there is a dark side to the picture, of which some notice must be taken. Many irregularities and extravagances, both in their habits and doctrines, were early laid to the charge of some of these associations. From the nature of their constitution they were peculiarly liable to be influenced by wild enthusiasts, and led away by erratic spirits. Many of the working class who were well able to labour, but rude and ignorant, abandoned their employments, and assuming a peculiar dress, with a cowl upon their heads, they wandered about the country, seeking lodgings in the houses of the Brethren

<sup>1</sup> Gieseler, ii. 3, pp. 206, 207.

<sup>2</sup> Mosheim, p. 401. Gieseler, ii. 3, sec. 207.

<sup>3</sup> Mosheim, p. 653. Gieseler, ii. sec. 208.



and Sisters; and living indolent and easy lives, they held secret meetings to propagate false doctrine, subversive not only of Church authority, but of sound morality. Teaching, for instance, that men ought to live in a state of innocence and freedom, as if in Paradise before the fall, they introduced a doctrine somewhat similar to what is now known under the term of Communism. Instead, therefore, of being useful to society by their labours, many of the Beghards and Lollards became common pests by their sloth, mendicancy, and unsound views of religion and moral life.<sup>1</sup> Thus in many cases the Beghards and Lollards fell to be loose sectarians, and brought disrepute upon the Beguines as well; so that these associations were looked upon with suspicion; and, not unfrequently, hostile measures were taken against them by the Church.

In originating the Communities of the Brothers and Sisters of Common Life, therefore, we evidently see a revival of, or return to, the purer and nobler form of older religious associations. But among the Brothers of Common Life may be noticed a principle of greater security against the inroads of those evils which led to the downfall of those societies which preceded them. The measures taken will shew this. The great desire of those interested in the formation of the Brotherhood originated under Gerard, was to effect a reformation in religion, by manifesting a life of thorough, earnest, practical, vital Christianity. In their mode of life and pursuits they constituted a union of Brethren conformed, as far as the circumstances of the times would permit, to the Apostolic pattern.<sup>2</sup> One great safeguard, then, was in having Brethren to live in connection with the ministry of the Church, and to be subject to such as heartily entered into the spirit of the grand design, and were themselves examples of what the Christian life should be. It is not good either for the

<sup>1</sup> Gieseler, ii. 3, secs. 267, 269.

<sup>2</sup> Thus Thomas à Kempis, remarking that Florentius strove to make the Brotherhood such, says, 'Sacrae Apostolicæ vitæ cum suis Presbyteris et Clericis formam humiliter imitando.' *Vita Joh. Gronde*, i. 3.

clergy or people to live alone by themselves too much, separated from each other in the toils and trials of life. It is likely to prove injurious to both in more ways than one. It may therefore be regarded as a much safer and healthier condition of existence that the Brethren were drawn into closer and more familiar intercourse with some ordained ministers of the Church. Forming a nucleus, the latter gradually gathered around them others from the world awakened to a desire for the new life in Christ Jesus.

Thus the Brothers, combining for the cultivation of genuine piety, procured for themselves the means of a simple livelihood, partly like the Apostle Paul by manual labour, and partly by receiving voluntary donations, which, however, no one was permitted to solicit, except in a case of urgent necessity. Imitating the Church at Jerusalem, and prompted by brotherly affection, they mutually shared with each other their earnings and their property, and consecrated even their fortune, if they possessed any, to the service of the community. From this source, and from the donations and legacies made to them, arose other Brother-houses, in each of which a certain number of earnest minded Christians lived together, subject, it is true, in diet, dress, and general way of life, to an appointed rule, but yet not wholly sequestered from the world after the manner of monks, for, as it will be seen, they had a certain freedom of intercourse, and in such a way as to preserve the principle of individual liberty, whilst they studiously kept within the bounds of religious discipline. Their whole rule was to be observed not from constraint, but of a ready mind and a free will, so that the Brotherhood had much of the freedom of a voluntary association, whilst the wholesome government of godly living and subjection to authority was strictly required, hence all obedience, even the most unconditional, was willingly and affectionately paid for God's sake.

The prohibition to go about the country begging, or for any other purpose, unless exceptionally permitted, was another great safeguard against the Brothers falling into

dangerous ways ; not only because it necessitated regular manual labour for their support, but prevented them from having their minds distracted by outward things, and enabled them the more completely to fix their desires upon the spiritual life ; whilst the employment and liberty which they had, allowed a certain degree of freedom and intercourse with their Brethren, which they enjoyed, and which served to keep both their souls and bodies in a healthy state.

But there was another safeguard which was of great service in preserving them from being led away by fanaticism or wild enthusiasm, because it gave them a useful object and purpose in life to look after, and that was the encouragement they gave to intellectual pursuits, and the interest they took in education. Much of the instruction given in schools at that time was often only within the reach of those who could pay for it, whilst there was no little defect in imparting it. Even in those schools attached to monasteries it was often superficial, and mingled with superstitious notions opposed to true enlightenment. The Brothers of the Common Life, on the contrary, not only promoted the giving of Instruction gratuitously, or assisted those unable to pay for it, and thus brought the arts of reading and writing within the reach of many that could not otherwise attain them ; but, what was of more consequence, they infused into education quite a new life, and imparted to it a purer and a nobler aim.

It is well known to the student of history that a great improvement in the character of education took place about this time, and that the advance of learning in the northern parts of Germany is greatly indebted to the efforts of the Brothers of Common Life.<sup>1</sup> Though Gerard charged the members of the Brotherhood to look to Christ as the Source of all light and truth, all life and peace, and without Whom all learning or gifts were but as vain

<sup>1</sup> It is said of the *Fratres Communis Vitæ*, 'Qui scholas Latinas juventuti undique ad se confluenti aperirent, et non bonis tantum literis sed et bene vivendi moribus discipulos instruerent.' *Andrææ, Bibl. Belg.* p. 277.

shadows, yet he would not confine them to none but Christian authors. Among the ancient philosophers he would have his educated disciples to read the works of Plato and Aristotle, and valued the former for his excellent discourses in the person of Socrates. The morals of Seneca pleased him much, and he recommended them to the Brothers as a rich mine of wisdom. He himself was versed in the art of medicine and knew something of law ; and it is evident that some of his disciples were much esteemed for their knowledge of them. And from what Thomas à Kempis says of Gerard, he would have the clerics to study geometry, arithmetic, logic, grammar, and other subjects.<sup>1</sup> From which it will be perceived that the Brothers of Common Life were urged to the pursuit of what at that time was a liberal and enlightened education ; and consequently were the first in their generation, and in those parts, to promote and encourage it, and were thereby the less likely to be led away or inflated by an ignorant or foolish enthusiasm.

But above all, the study of the Holy Scriptures was to be regarded by them as the beginning, and the foundation, of all solid knowledge. And of these the Gospels were placed before all else, as containing the life of our great Exemplar. ‘Let the root of thy study,’ he says, ‘and the mirror of thy life be in the first place the Gospel of Christ, because there is the Life of Christ.’<sup>2</sup> This was the fundamental rule, we must remember, of the Founder of the Society, which had now received Thomas à Kempis within its arms, and within which he was to live and die. In the next place Gerard recommended the Lives of the Fathers and early Saints, and their holding conferences among themselves, as great helps and incitements in the Christian race. He seems to have especially pointed out to them the works of St. Ambrose and St. Augustine, St. Jerome and Gregory the Great, with those of St. Bernard and of our

<sup>1</sup> *Vita Gerardi*, xviii. 56.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* xviii. II. ‘Revertor ad scientias. Radix studii tui et speculum vite sint primo Evangelium Christi, quia ibi est vita Christi.’



venerable Bede. Thus according to the best of the ability, piety, and learning which he possessed he established, with the aid of other earnest souls about him, such a Community of Christians that was highly pleasing and of great value to many excellent people, but to none more than to the pious Brothers who were trained therein, John and Thomas à Kempis.

It had been begun, as we have shewn, in great simplicity under the blessing of God. To the young clerics he had joined certain priests and laymen, thus making a mixed society. Idleness and accumulation of worldly goods had been the rock on which so many of the Monastic Orders had made shipwreck ; and therefore to the cultivation of the Interior life had been joined some useful employment and the pursuit of fine letters. And that the mind should not become enervated by the work of copying manuscripts being too long carried on as a mere manual operation, Gerard had prescribed to each of the clerics that he should make extracts of the finest sayings he met with, especially of the Fathers and of the Saints, and even make minutes of his own reflections, and inscribe them in a certain book called 'Rapiarium.' And as the enthusiastic deacon of Deventer always joined example with precept, he himself transcribed and published many little works composed from the works of the Saints, most of which are now lost.<sup>1</sup> It is doubtless from this custom, which Thomas à Kempis largely carried out in the early days of his connection with the Brotherhood, that we are mainly indebted for those many little devotional works which he afterwards wrote, at the head of which he places the books of the 'De Imitatione Christi.'

<sup>1</sup> Thom. à Kem., *Vita Gerard. Mag.* cap. xiii. ; cf. *Chron. Wind.* lib. ii. c. 62, 65, and 67. For a definition of *rapiarium*, see Ducange. Respecting the other works of Gerard, Neale says, the greater part remain MSS. in the libraries of his native land. Of his printed compositions the most remarkable is his *Protest concerning True Preaching*. He also left treatises on *The Institute of Common Life*, *On the Institution of Novices*, *On the Government of a Sisterhood*, *On the Recall of those who have Fallen*, &c.—*Jansenist Church*, p. 82.

There was another custom which prevailed among the Brothers of Common Life, and had been borrowed from the manners of the primitive Church, and which has since been much perverted in the Church of Rome, and that was, not Auricular confession to the Priest which then prevailed, but mutual confession of their faults daily one to another. It had originated in this way. One day Gerard found himself alone with two of his pious friends, Florentius and John de Zutphen, and, yearning after greater perfection in himself and others, he said to them, 'My friends, why should we not give each other advice upon our conduct, if one has seen aught reprehensible in the other?' They willingly accepted what he said, and freely admonishing one another in turn, they humbly acknowledged their faults, and sought forgiveness; and being thus lovingly corrected, they went their way in peace.<sup>1</sup> This was gradually adopted by the Brothers, and every evening before they retired to rest, if one was conscious of having done wrong, he acknowledged his fault, or if one of the Brothers saw anything reprehensible in another, it was named to him, that he might confess his offence and amend.

From what is said elsewhere by à Kempis and others, auricular confession was still practised among the Brothers; but the practice of *mutual* confession one to another, which was at first confined to the Brothers, spread imperceptibly, and contributed to the religious improvement of the people. It was natural that the laymen who became in any way connected with them should frequently converse upon the state of their souls, and that confidential communications, disclosures, and admonitions should be made. And these could not but tend powerfully on the one hand to excite piety and sharpen the moral sense, and on the other to force into the background that confession to the priests which the Church compelled, and thus indirectly at least

<sup>1</sup> Thom. à Kemp., *Vita Gerard. Mag.*, cap. xii.

give a blow to that formidable institution which puts into their hands so much questionable power.<sup>1</sup>

It is after a similar method to the Brothers, that later on, Calvin, by the institution of 'Grabot,' and Wesley, by the examination, or the telling of each one's experience, in classes under the direction of leaders, have endeavoured to restore the austere discipline of the primitive age without falling into the abuses of auricular confession.

Common poverty was also made a rule among them, for this was regarded in the eyes of Gerard as one of the most efficacious remedies against that lust of wealth, luxury, and indolence, which had so corrupted the Monastic Orders; never did this Apostolic missionary lose sight of this as a means of reformation, since he therein saw a road to perfection, opened by the Apostles to the first Christians under the direction of the Holy Spirit Himself. Hence he warmly recommended it to the Brothers of Common Life, that they should share the fruits of their labours, and only receive out what was needed for their present necessities. He severely applied the prescription of St. Bernard, from which this proverb was borrowed, 'A religious that possesses a single farthing is not worth a farthing.' And with such abhorrence did the Brothers come to regard any self-appropriation, that on one occasion having found some florins hidden in the cell of a Brother who died suddenly, they caused him to be buried without prayers, and without the honours they usually paid to their deceased Brethren.

Though acts of self-denial and mortification of the flesh were carried on among them, they constantly kept in mind the admonitions of their founder, that all ascetic exercises, as fasting, flagellation, recitation of *Paternosters*, and such like, had no value or utility unless they conduced to a more virtuous life, and the obtaining the peace and joy of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, it was an accepted principle among them that, to realize the kingdom of God within

<sup>1</sup> In an old directory for the Brothers, given by Delprat, sec. 162, we read, 'The disclosure of our faults one to another is the badge and welfare of the Community of the Common Life.'

them, they must have the love of God and a regard to their neighbours' welfare ; they must maintain an Interior life, and accept all the events of life, the pleasures or sufferings, the advantages or losses, as coming from the hand of God.<sup>1</sup> Thus were they to go on to perfection, and aspire to be without reproach, having a good conscience in keeping with the Word of God.

By these means it was sought to keep up and preserve in the framework and existence of the society an ever increasing knowledge of Divine Truth, a healthy glow of fervent piety, a genial activity of mind and body, and at the same time to guard the members more safely from the inroads of numerous evils, and declensions of devotion which are apt to steal in upon religious bodies. There is indeed no security either for societies or individuals, however sacred or earnest they may be, against temptations of various sorts that ever beset them ; and strange as it may seem, it is none the less true, that, when prosperity sets in, and there comes a feeling of being well established, there is then the greater danger of falling, and the decay of vital piety is most to be feared. The best security, therefore, for Communities as well as for each separate person, is in having a constant consciousness of their own fallibility, leading them to a continual recurring dependence upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, and to renewed endeavours from time to time to be more conformed to the image of Christ. How often, moreover, do earnest work, hard struggles, the enduring afflictions, the encountering difficulties, conduce to the increase of grace, and act as a preservative against decay and laxity ; and thus it was in the first movements and early career of the Brothers of Common Life. And of these I must say a few more words.

It must not be forgotten that as Florentius had first suggested the idea, so also did his labours, as it will be seen, contribute in no small degree to the positive growth and further spread of the Community. Under his direction, and with the encouragement of the town-council—who

<sup>1</sup> G. Groote, *Allocution morale*, MS., Hague, No. 429.



were the more inclined to favour the Brothers out of respect to the memory of Gerard—several Brother-houses were founded at Deventer; and only the year before Thomas came, a very large one had been opened, which was called the rich Brother-house, or the house of Florentius.

Still it must not be supposed that the Brotherhood of the Common Life was begun, maintained, and developed, without encountering much opposition and at times serious attacks. As Gerard had given much offence by his sermons to some of the clergy and others, who felt themselves reproved by his words and holy life, so also was the bitter animosity of the Mendicant Friars stirred up against the new brotherhood and sisterhood, which he mainly established, supported, and defended.

These parties saw themselves put to shame by the genuine piety and christian charity which strikingly manifested itself among the Brothers. The education of the young was to a great extent taken out of their hands, their whole influence over the people was weakened, and, as a consequence of this, their importance and revenues were materially diminished.

The Chronicler of Windesheim tells us that at the time when the devout priests and clerics were living together in the house of Florentius, and also certain Sisters were dwelling in common in the house of Gerard, faithfully serving God their creator, certain Brethren of the Mendicant Order, contrary to the rules of their profession, ceased not publicly to oppose, and privately to calumniate their holy life; especially did they condemn their living together in common, accusing them of being 'neither one thing nor the other, a mongrel race, neither belonging to the world, nor to Monachism: and that they should belong either to one, or the other;' and with such like arguments they endeavoured to show that the kind of life adopted by the Brothers of Common Life was rejected and anathematized by the Church of God in the Clementine decrees, issued some while ago.

Then, continues the chronicler, Gerard, a man most

learned in the Holy Scriptures, in matters of right and law and in all things relating to mundane affairs, ascended the pulpit (*ambonem*) of Deventer, and openly confuting them, publicly charged them with falsehood, and denounced them to be the propagators of palpable errors and unsound doctrines : proving further, from evangelical and apostolical authority, that the lives and habits of the Brothers had never been condemned by the Church of God, but that from the beginning of Christianity to the present time, such a manner of living had been preserved and lauded as the true outcome of Gospel teaching ; and that neither the Clementine decrees, nor any other law, ecclesiastical or divine, had ever reprehended such communities as these, so praiseworthy and acceptable to God ; and that they were not to be falsely condemned, but always to be greatly, openly, and particularly commended.

Gerard moreover showed wherein the Clementine decrees were not applicable to the Brothers of Common Life ; for those decrees had been directed against the Beghards, who were often called the Children or Brethren of the Free Spirit, because some of them, forsaking their original rule of life, had taken to wandering idly about, living on charity, and teaching errors, contrary to Christian faith and practice, and had justly been condemned by the Holy Catholic Church. But these things could not be charged against ‘ the Brothers of Common Life,’ since they did not go about from place to place, nor beg as the mendicants did, but remained quietly in their abode, serving God with all their hearts, and maintaining themselves by the work of their own hands. Thus did Gerard, as he had promised, stand forth as the defender of the Brothers.

And then the pious historian adds these remarks : ‘ We see then that by no law, not even the Clementine decrees, were presbyters, clerics, and laymen, nor even women, living by themselves separate from others, after the apostolic custom—not being implicated in any error—forbidden to unite themselves together, and dwell collectively in one house, when nature inclined them to do this. For

man, he says, is a social and political animal, that is, he is inclined to live with others for society, and under some government for order and protection. Natural law urges us to this, because it is better for two to be together than alone ; and the Christian religion rejoices in those who thus unite together, because all those who believed were together and had all things common.<sup>1</sup> And would that the Mendicants had some regard to the requirements of their Order, and that they would severally condemn such of their Brethren as did not walk according to the appointed rule, instead of rising up against the simple-minded sheep of Christ's fold, who live quietly together, labouring with their own hands, alike preserving their chastity, and avoiding the snares of worldly affairs, obedient to their superiors, regarding worldly feast-times with abhorrence, shunning wandering and licentious Brethren, not observing the rule of their order, and following closely in the ardent purpose of their founder. And may the Lord God for ever keep and defend all such as live in this holy estate !'<sup>2</sup>

Though silenced for a time, the Mendicants did not long remain idle ; it was after this rebuff from Gerard, that one of their number, Bartholomæus, named in the 'Life of Gerard,' 'that unlearned little fox,' as the Chronicler of Windesheim tells us he was called, 'disfigured by many stains upon his character, and the open destroyer of the faith,' came forth to oppose the great missionary single-handed.<sup>3</sup> He was eventually condemned, as we have intimated, and made to do open penance ; yet 'the Brothers of Common Life at Campen suffered much persecution from the hands of the citizens who were incited against them by the Mendicants.' And the same occurred at Zwolle and other towns where they were settled in a greater or less degree. In time, however, the animosity slackened, neither was it so general ; the people began to think better of the Brothers, and to admire their conduct ; warm friends were

<sup>1</sup> *Acts* ii. 44, and iv. 34.

<sup>2</sup> Buschius, *Chron. Windes.*, i. ch. iii. 10-14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* ch. iv. p. 17.

raised up unto them, though they still had bitter enemies ; and in other places where they planted new Brother-houses they had to encounter fresh animosity. Gerard was enabled to pay more attention, and personally superintend the formation of these, when no longer suffered to preach in public.

And after his death, Thomas à Kempis tells us, that the devotion of the faithful in Deventer, Zwolle, Campen, and the neighbouring towns began to increase exceedingly in the Lord, so that, in a short space of time, many congregations of men and women came severally to dwell together in common life and in purity before God, according to the form of the Primitive Church, and after the manner of the sainted Fathers, and as it had been begun by the apostles. With them a great multitude of people, not caring to live in cities, sought dwellings for themselves away from the busy haunts of men, and, having erected humble habitations, they chose to lead a secluded life in all godly quietness. But in process of time, to promote the welfare of souls, many of the Brothers took upon them, by the will of God, the religious habit : and for greater usefulness and protection to the brethren translated these places into Monasteries of Canons Regular. Respecting this very work the venerable Master, inspired from above, had given instruction, and predicted a great increase of *devotees* : hence one of our brotherhood, says Thomas, addressing himself to a priest, who was afterwards a Canon Regular of Zwolle, spake to this effect : ‘ Behold, beloved, this good work, which, by the help of God, has been begun here, how greatly it has increased, and to what extent this flame of devotion has been kindled through all Holland and Gelderland ! Thanks be unto God, for like as we have heard, so have we seen with our eyes, not only in the regions near at hand, but also in the more distant and important places of the land.’<sup>1</sup>

Thomas à Kempis entered heartily and fully into the

<sup>1</sup> From the papers added to the *Chronicles of Mount St. Agnes*, pp. 152, 153.



spirit of the Brotherhood, and the spiritual advantages of such a life. He himself became not only a model Brother, but greatly commended this mode of living to others, and especially as it seemed to be a following the example of the Primitive Christians, in the days of the Apostles, when it is said, that 'all that believed were together and had all things common.' He has given an admirable discourse upon this subject, in his *Conciones et Meditationes* (xxxvi.) addressed to the Brothers in the Chapel of Mount St. Agnes in the first instance, and is well worthy of being read through. I can however only find room for one short passage, which will form a very appropriate close to the present chapter.

O what a holy and joyful congregation was that in the Primitive Church, gathered together in the Holy Ghost, which could not in any wise be disquieted so long as the unity of the faith was kept entire in the bonds of charity. The giving up of our property in respect of temporal things, conformity in good manners, prompt obedience of those in subjection, an exemplary life in superiors, a pious condescension to the infirmities of others, strict correction of transgressions, and a due subordination in every office, do most especially conduce to the perfect observance of brotherly love. And that nothing may be wanting to the community, or suffered to go to ruin, every one stands obliged to the utmost of his power to advance the common good; to the end that charity may shine in all our works, and God may be highly glorified thereby.

I must now pass on to give some further account of à Kempis at Deventer, his association with the Brothers, and his yearning after a spiritual life.

## CHAPTER VII.

The Progress of à Kempis at Deventer—His Fellowship with the Brothers of Common Life—The daily routine of the Brother-house—À Kempis earnestly desires to know more of the hidden life with God from some pious friend—Various changes take place among the Brothers—The illness of à Kempis whilst at Deventer—Observation on his ‘Soliloquy of the Soul’—Evidences of his Spiritual history—His meditations on the near prospect of death—He longs for deliverance from the flesh and to enter eternal glory—The recollection of his physician’s kindness.

THE years Thomas à Kempis spent at Deventer, as he passed from youth to early manhood, were of momentous value, and were occupied in a regular routine of daily duties. And though one day was much like another, with little variation, they were happy days to him, full of a delicious enthusiasm for devotion; he was eager and persevering in the acquisition of learning that he might the better fit himself for God’s service; and filling up his leisure moments in transcribing some good manuscript, that he might in some measure repay the kindness of his benefactors, there was a joy in his toil; for he felt that he was beginning the business of life in earnest, and was getting on, ‘something attempted, something done;’ and a glow of satisfaction and thankfulness often filled his breast. Associated with others of a like mind, he had the gentle stimulus of emulation to urge him on, and the approval and encouragement of those who took an interest in his welfare. His writing was much admired, for he took great pains to form a good hand, and make his letters and words neatly and accurately. His proficiency in the Latin tongue also was truly praiseworthy, not only in the readiness and accuracy with which he was able to translate it, but also in composing Latin out of his mother tongue; the which proved of great service to him afterwards, as it enabled him

to read the Bible—then in Latin—and the works of the Fathers, and other learned books, with facility, as well as to turn into fair Latin the many and various works that he composed.

He was also daily gaining a deeper acquaintance with the Word of God, and a better comprehension of the will of God therein revealed, not only by listening to the instructions, expositions, and set discourses of earnest preachers and spiritual masters, but by a loving and diligent study and perusal of the Holy Word for himself, and by the friendly conferences and discussions which were constantly held with the devout Brethren, upon one portion or another. For here it may be a fitting place to mention, that it was a custom among the younger Brothers of Common Life to have, not only stated conferences with their appointed Superiors for discourse about the way of Life, and for the advancement of piety, but also occasional entertainments or colloquies among themselves, of a more private and less formal character, but having the same end in view, and at which but two or three were present. Thomas à Kempis was a great promoter and lover of these little gatherings, and so also was his beloved contemporary Lubert Berner, a person of inflamed devotion, and of a most pleasant and cheerful conversation, and whose frequent saying was—when any coldness of heart seemed to come upon him or upon any of his near associates, or when he longed for holy communion with devout and kindred souls, or had a mind to engage in spiritual discourse, from something borne in upon his mind—‘Come, brother, let us warm one another,’ or, he would exclaim with fervent affection, ‘When, oh when shall we again be inflamed, or set on fire!’<sup>1</sup>

These were occasions of true delight, when such pious souls tasted the sweetness of maintaining godly fellowship one with another; for so earnestly were they affected in these seasons of sacred intercourse that their hearts glowed

<sup>1</sup> ‘Quando, quando volumus nos iterum ignire?’ (Thom. à Kemp. *Vita Lub. Bern.*, no. v. sec. 16, p. 78).

within them, whilst they conferred together about Christ their dear Lord and what He had said unto them, as also concerning their 'hope of glory,' to be obtained through Him. For so much was this the case that, sometimes forgetting themselves, and the accustomed hour of repose, they tarried together till near midnight, being kept awake with the fire of devotion kindled within them, sweetly melting their souls into the conscious love of God and the earnest desire to be right resolute in diligently keeping His commandments. Thus they made experiments for themselves, as Thomas à Kempis has it, of the Psalmist's words—proving the truth of what he said in their own persons—'Thy word burneth exceedingly, and Thy servant loveth it:' as it is according to the Vulgate.<sup>1</sup> There are those who understand what is here meant, and who, like Thomas à Kempis and his devout companions, have felt the fire kindling within them—who have experienced the warmth of a holy fervour pervading their souls, when in company with two or three others they have been engaged in reading the Holy Scriptures in a reverent and prayerful spirit of inquiry to know what the will of God is; the which is a sufficient testimony to sincere Christians that there is a way of studying, and conferring together upon the Word of God to ascertain its sense and inner spiritual significance, so as to inflame the soul with fervent desires, till it works effectually in them that believe.

How forcibly does such holy intercourse recall to mind the words of the two disciples who had journeyed to Emmaus, when they said one to another, after Jesus had left them, 'Did not our heart burn within us, while He talked with us by the way, and while He opened to us the Scrip-

<sup>1</sup> 'Ignitum colloquium tuum vehementer.' (*Lat. Vulg. Ps. cxix. 140.*) In our English version, the passage is rendered thus, 'Thy word is very pure,' and in the marginal reference, 'tried,' or 'refined.' In the Prayer Book version it is, 'Thy word is tried to the uttermost.' The idea derived from the Hebrew is that it was pure, like things refined by fire. Now Thomas and the Brothers took the meaning to be that the Word was not only 'pure,' but had an active signification, and was as a fire kindling new life in the soul, and purifying it. Which interpretation may well stand with the other, as it adds beauty and force to the passage.



tures?'<sup>1</sup> which should assure us that we may, nay, should so read the Sacred Records, as to have Jesus talking with us, and opening them to us, till it makes,

. . . Our lukewarm hearts to glow  
With lowly love and fervent will.

In this pious custom of the Brothers of Common Life, we see exemplified too that beautiful picture of olden times, alluded to by the Prophet Malachi, where he says, 'Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another; and the Lord hearkened and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon His name.'<sup>2</sup>

Something as to the daily routine at the Brother-house where Thomas à Kempis was, may be learnt from his Life of John Ketel, who, to the day of his death, superintended and took the most active part in the kitchen. Early in the morning he rose, usually when he heard the clock strike three. After he had finished his morning devotions, he read the appointed service for Churchmen—not the longer one which the ecclesiastics used, but the shorter one appointed for the laity, which is still to be met with in the old manuals of prayer, called *Prime*, or the *Matins* usually said first.<sup>3</sup> After this followed the reading of the Holy Scriptures, and then he wrote down anything which had especially been impressed upon his mind. At five o'clock he began his secular work, looked after the kitchen, and attended to the business connected with it, or if there was nothing requiring his attention, he would close the kitchen and bind books, or do anything he was commissioned to do until the time for returning to the kitchen.

At nine o'clock, when the bell from the Church near at hand rang out for mass, he began to read a portion from

<sup>1</sup> St. Luke, xxiv. 32.

<sup>2</sup> Mal. iii. 16.

<sup>3</sup> *Matins* was the early morning service, which being finished, *Prime* was to be said, as time allowed.

the book of Hours, viz., the *Terce*,<sup>1</sup> upon his bended knees in the house, as far as the Psalms, and then he went to Church, reading or repeating to himself the remainder on his way. In the Church he would remain upon his knees throughout the whole service in some corner, devoutly meditating upon the Life and Passion of our beloved Lord, according to his wonted custom. Service being ended, he would begin to repeat the hour of *Sext*<sup>2</sup> in the Church as far as the Psalms, and then finish the remainder on his way back. When he had returned to the kitchen, his habit was to pray a little, and then to consider with himself what he had to do during the day, and in what points it was necessary for him to amend, to which he would endeavour to apply himself, having always before his eyes that mirror of life, our beloved Lord Jesus, that he might minister to Him. Then the mid-day meal had to be prepared; and when it was served, the Benediction being said—he himself would only eat after the others had finished dinner, preferring to read aloud to the Brethren whilst they ate.

After having dined he would go to his cell and at once recite the *None*,<sup>3</sup> and then would perform other duties in the house, until the second bell sounded at the Church of the Mendicant Friars (apud Fratres Minores) to sing the *Vespers* or Even-song, when he would go through the same in the kitchen, meanwhile washing the crockery and putting it away. Then he would occupy himself in medi-

<sup>1</sup> 'Terce' was usually said at nine o'clock, being the third hour of Scripture, when, as St. Luke tells us, that the Holy Ghost descended upon the apostles and visibly manifested His presence. (Acts ii. 15.) And because it is thought to be the hour in which Jesus received the sentence of death from Pilate. There was a liberty, however, of saying these 'hours' at any other part of the three hours.

<sup>2</sup> 'Sext' was said at twelve o'clock, because at this hour Christ suffered for us—nailed to the Cross. (St. Luke xxiii. 44.) At this hour too St. Peter ascended the house-top to pray. (Acts x. 9.)

<sup>3</sup> 'None' was said at three o'clock, because at this hour Jesus tasted death for us. (St. Luke, xxiii. 44-46.) And we read also that at this hour 'Peter and John went up together into the temple at (as it is called) the hour of prayer, being the ninth hour.' (Acts iii. 1.)

tation, or considering what good thing he could do, till seven o'clock came, when it was time to prepare the evening meal. Supper being over, he had then to consider for the morrow, what the sick and the Brethren must have for food, and bring the things to the kitchen: and then having repeated the *Compline*,<sup>1</sup> he would wish the Brothers good-night, and return to his cell at nine o'clock, when, after engaging in other more private devotions, he would retire to rest.<sup>2</sup>

Since the faithful Brother was an intimate friend of Thomas à Kempis, we shall learn more of him afterwards, but we would here say that after this fashion à Kempis and the Brothers of Common Life generally spent all their days in noiseless activity, peaceful contentedness, godly recollectedness, and a cheerful round of undisturbed devotion;—with this difference only, that the time spent by John Ketel in the kitchen was employed by them in writing, or in some other useful kind of work. Upon reviewing their manner of life, an observer is forcibly struck with the heavenly and devout society, the true fellowship of Christ's followers, that had been here congregated together; and how unceasingly they strove to mingle pious thoughts and exercises with their daily labours, and to keep up the fire of Divine love in their hearts along with fraternal charity.

In one of the earlier works of Thomas à Kempis there is an evident allusion to an interesting episode which shows his earnest desire at this period to learn more of the Interior life, and the true secret of holding communion with God. He now regarded himself as a disciple in the school of Christ, and he narrates a colloquy which took place between a learner in Divine things and one who had had some experience in them. We have little doubt from what is said but that Thomas was the inquirer, though it must be a matter of conjecture as with whom it was that he held such sacred converse. We imagine that it was

<sup>1</sup> From the Latin 'completorium,' signifying the *completion* of all the duties of the day.

<sup>2</sup> Thom. à Kemp. *Vita J. Cacabi vel Ketel*, tom. iii. no. x. sec. 18.

either Arnold, or Ketel, or it might have been Florentius ; but whoever it was, he was one that à Kempis regarded as highly gifted with the grace of God and the favour of His presence. Whether by accident, or as a privileged person who was permitted to have access to this individual in the season of devotion, à Kempis appears to have heard the devout breathings of his pious soul as he poured out his heart in fervent meditation and prayer. The words to which he had listened and which led to the inquiry that succeeds were treasured up, and afterwards adapted so as to form the beginning of one of his much valued devotional works. From this we shall select several passages to illustrate what has been advanced. A portion of what à Kempis heard is as follows :—

O my God, Thou art my only good. Thou alone art good and sweet. To speak of Thee is sweet to them that love Thee, to think of Thee is pleasant to the Devout, whose heart is not in the world, but is hidden with Thee in heaven.

So that Thou art to him the only true rest, and inward sweetness ; and that he may not be daily disquieted here, where false desire tempts him.

My God how is it at heart with him who burns with love of Thee? What manner of joy is his, whom no vanity of the creatures delights?

Does not his voice sing in the Psalm, from which I have taken the beginning of my speech, after this manner : ‘Whom have I in heaven but Thee, and what have I desired on earth beside Thee?’

There is apparently a slight pause, and à Kempis breaks in, and says :—

Oh ! holy and devout soul, hanging upon God, what is this that I hear from thee? What is this that thou sayest? Do all things in heaven and earth seem small to thee?

The reply comes :—

Yea, all things are small to me.

À Kempis, anxious to learn more, inquires further :—

What then dost thou seek? Whom desirest thou without



these? And where wilt thou find Him without them? Hath He a name, or a place, or a habitation, where He may be sought?

Where is the place of the habitation of His glory, of Whom thou hast sung, saying :—‘O Lord, I have loved the beauty of Thy House, and the place of the habitation of Thy Glory.’<sup>1</sup> Answer me, I beseech thee.

For if thou canst show Him unto me, I will go along with thee, and we will seek Him together, and thy God shall be my God. And it shall be well with us, when He hath been found by us and detained.

*His pious Friend.* What is this which thou seekest of me, or why dost thou pry after anything of this sort, as if it were with me? Thinkest thou that I can, and am able to tell thee of such matters?

But if charity should prompt me to do this, does not the rareness of the subject, or the profoundness of the secret prevent my declaring them? Why askest thou me?

Ask those who have seen and heard ; behold these know who He is, Whom thou seekest.

But better far ask Him, Who knoweth all things. For it is even He of Whom we now speak, Who will more openly manifest Himself to thee, and show thee more clearly where He dwelleth.

Since He it is Who teacheth man knowledge, and giveth grace unto the humble.

Draw near, then, to Him, Who revealeth Himself whensoever He will, and to whom He pleaseth ; nor is there any one that can open this matter without Him.

He alone is able to reveal to thee the joy of those that love Him, and that far beyond what thou canst learn from me.

*A Kempis.* And now, why speakest thou thus, O holy and humble soul? Think not that I would seek from thee what, perchance, ought not to be known, or cannot be told.

Let thy secret remain with thee ; let thy door be shut upon thee ; let the seal of faith remain unbroken ; neither let the veil be taken from the sanctuary.

Eat holy bread in the Sacrament, within the tabernacle of thine house ; ascend to the upper chamber, enter the wine-cellar of the King Eternal.

Or, what is to be preferred, and is sweeter far, enter the marriage-chamber of thy heavenly Bridegroom.

I know that it is written : ‘It is not meet to take the children’s

<sup>1</sup> Ps. xxvi. 8.

bread, and cast it to dogs,' that they may eat. I know and have read this.

But pray see what follows, and pity me according to the word of her, who said : 'The dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from the Master's table.'

Do not hide from me the matter I inquire after ; but out of the fulness of thy interior sweetness, shed forth but one spark of burning love.

Give but a little drop of precious wine ; emit even a little portion of the odour from that richest of ointments, that I also may taste it, the best part of which is known to thee, and which is so often a delightful refreshment.

À Kempis now waits for a reply, but there is no answer. There had been a shrinking on the part of his friend—as it is with all true souls—to lay bare to any other eye but God's the inmost life of his heart, hitherto spent in the privacy of his chamber, or kept secret from others. And with the idea of diverting Thomas from his desire to learn what had been known to God only, of the depth of that sweet and hidden communion he had held with Him, he bids à Kempis to address himself to God, and seek to know from Him. À Kempis having acknowledged that there is a life with God that should be kept hid from the world, knowing that it is destructive of its freshness and reality to expose it to the gaze of idle and captious curiosity, is still unwilling to be put off, and perseveres in his request with reverent boldness ; he earnestly longs to draw nearer to God ; he is covetous to know more of the art of holding devout intercourse with the most High from one who has much excelled in it. And with a sacred and yearning importunity he once more entreats his friend to grant him the favour he asks, and thus again pleads with him :—

Why delayest thou ? Do satisfy him that so eagerly desireth, and open the door to a friend, knocking now for the third time.

Speak, beloved of the Beloved, and yet do not overlook me. If thou art not able to speak of Him, as He is, speak of Him, however, as best thou canst.

For who can speak of Him, as He is ; and who can under-

stand him that should so speak? Therefore if thou canst not speak of Him as He is in Himself, say, at least, what He doth in thee.

If thou knowest not what He is as regards Himself, yet proclaim what good He hath done to thee. 'For who shall find out what He is in Himself?' Thou canst not do this, as thou hast thyself confessed, and dost not deny, saying: 'Such knowledge is too wonderful for me: it is high, I cannot attain unto it. Whither shall I go from Thy Spirit?'<sup>1</sup>

If then thou art not able to fathom thy own spirit, which the Creator and Quickener of all spirits created, how wilt thou fathom the Uncreated? Was it not hence that thou in astonishment didst say: 'Lord, who is like unto Thee?' Yet tell me, I pray thee, by some similitude or other, of Him whose essential Being thou hast not yet reached. For thou shouldst not deny a part to whom thou thinkest the whole should not be revealed.

*The pious Friend.* I confess that thou art too inquisitive, and too importunate with me. Thou perseveringly searchest out all that is in me, and puttest thine hand upon the secrets of my chamber. I sent thee to Him, and thou comest to me again. Seekest thou me, or Him? But I demand of thee of what spirit art thou? Be quiet, I pray, and trouble me not—For He Whom thou seekest is above me.

*À Kempis.* And I said: Shall he who seeketh God be so easily quieted? Do not protract the discourse, since thou art able speedily to afford me consolation.

How long wilt thou keep my soul in suspense? What sayest thou, and what sayest thou not? As thy soul liveth, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. For a blessing it will be, if thou show Him unto me. Now, therefore, if thou hast seen Him, tell me plainly, and I will take hold of Him.

Seeing that à Kempis will not be persuaded to leave him in peace until he has given him some help towards attaining the interior life with God, this pious friend at last is inclined to yield to his holy persistency, and thinks that he may be of service to the useful devotee, and that God may not be displeased at his revealing to him, for his soul's welfare, the blessed secret of his hidden life whereby God is brought nearer to him, and he to God; and therefore is willing to make the attempt, though he feels that he is all

<sup>1</sup> Ps. cxxxix. 6.

the while unable to do this worthily enough, that his best efforts will come short of the reality of that communion, and therefore it is with a feeling of hesitation he again says :—

I see an earnest desire in thee, full of love for the Creator. Thou hast required a difficult thing from me ; nor do I know whether that can be done, which thou desirest. He, whom thou seekest knoweth full well that it is not mine to tell thee this. Thy search seems to be like that of the Bride in the Canticles ; ‘Show me Him,’ saith she, ‘whom my soul loveth.’<sup>1</sup>

Wouldst thou therefore learn of me who He is, and what good He hath done unto me ? Both one and the other, however, are secrets entrusted to me. But thou art not content, neither art thou deterred by His greatness, Who surpasseth the heavens, nor discouraged by my littleness, who am as nothing in His sight. Why hast thou imposed this burden upon me ? For to speak thereof is a task beyond me until I enter the sanctuary of God, and understand. Why wouldst thou know what I can hardly speak about.

*À Kempis.* And I said, why should it not please thee, yea exceedingly much ? For it is often most pleasing to know more concerning those matters which are with difficulty disclosed. Be not then, I pray thee, so reserved as to be altogether silent. Do not fear that I shall presently betray these things to enemies.

I will keep thy words for friends, and that for the choicest of friends. Thou mayest safely speak to me, in the secrecy of thy silence. Behold ! we two are here alone. Neither will I delight myself in curiosity, nor thou in arrogancy, but in Him alone, Who hath caused us to put our trust in Him, and of Whom we speak.

But if He Himself come unto us, let us give Him place, and let Him be in the midst of us ; and if He vouchsafe to speak, we will be ready to listen, and in the meantime we will keep silence. Nor wilt thou be obliged in that hour to answer my requests ; for while He speaks it is meet that all flesh should be silent.

The holy contention between these two devout friends now ends and they come to an understanding to seek the Lord together, and to wait till He vouchsafes in some way to acknowledge them, and meanwhile this pious Brother whom *à Kempis* was conversing with, thus speaks of the greatness and majesty of God :—

<sup>1</sup> Songs of Sol. iii. 3.



It is a good compact. Let Him only be with us : and may we be borne onward to our secret. Let Him give the word, and may He conduct us whither we delight to go. That Beloved for whom thou inquirest most diligently is such an One, and so great, that He cannot be fully set forth in discourse, since He is ineffable.

He is so high and so far exalted above all creatures, that He must ever remain incomprehensible. His power and magnificence is boundless. Whatever is said or written concerning Him, must be regarded as altogether unworthy of Him, because He is supereminent above all things.

The Heavens said :—He passed through us, and ascended up on high, and hath mightily prevailed over us. The Earth said :—If the Heaven of Heavens cannot contain Him, interrogate me not concerning Him. The Stars sang :—We are in darkness and not light, when He shineth. The Sea trembled, and said :—He is not in me, and the great deep knew Him not.

Hearest thou what these say ?

*À Kempis.* I have heard and am greatly troubled ; and because of their voice my lips trembled. What then shall be done : suppose we interrogate Him Himself.

*The pious Friend.* Let us ask : O Lord, art Thou He of Whom the men of old have sung, and to Whom all things in their seasons are subservient ?

And now it would appear that a solemn silence was kept for awhile. They wait upon God. They listen and hearken for the voice of God, to hear what He will say unto them. And as they wait in stillness at the footstool of grace, these words of God Himself, declaring His everlasting Name and Being, are borne in upon their souls in some mysterious manner ; whether audibly to both we know not, but the same words seem to come to both alike :—

‘ I AM that I AM ; and besides Me there is not another.’<sup>1</sup> ‘ I am the First and the Last, Creating and Governing all things. I live, saith the LORD, because I will reign for ever and ever.’<sup>2</sup>

After a little space of time, the pious friend again speaks to Thomas :—

What sayest thou now, O little worm, being surrounded by so

<sup>1</sup> Exodus iii. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Ps. x. 16.

great a light? Behold thy Beloved speaketh with thee, Whom thou thoughtest to be with me !

He was with me when I said to Him : ' It is good for me to hold fast to God.' He will be with thee, also, if thou in like manner sayest : ' My soul refuseth to be comforted, and I have not coveted the days of man. But in Thee, O Lord, will I put my trust ; for Thou art my King and my God.'

Thou must not be like inconstant lovers, but as one clinging to the One only, seeking the One only, who admits no rival from without. Let then thy converse be with Him only and alone ; and if He absents Himself, sit as a widow, patiently bearing all things. For this is His manner, to go away and to return, and to prove His beloved, and to make her perfect in love.

Let not His departure trouble thee, when thou longest for His approach. Expect Him, go on expecting Him ; for a little while He will go away, and after a little while He will return.<sup>1</sup> Yet all this is but what love effects ; which now raiseth the soul to the heights, and now bringeth her down to the depths.

His love is most gracious ; sweeter is it than all flowers, whiter than the lilies, more beautiful than glittering gems. Nothing in the creatures must be preferred to His love ; and therefore for the love of Him all things must be despised.

Thomas now speaks of himself after this manner :—

Touched by His love within me, I began to burn so in my inmost heart, that, despising all creatures, I prayed only for His most chaste embraces. And I uttered what seemed to many strange cries, bringing as it were burning coals from a heated furnace.

What is there for me, I said, in Heaven, and what can I desire on earth beside Thee, O God of my heart, and my portion, God to all eternity?

*The pious Friend.* Understand now concerning thy Beloved, Who He is, and how great, Who incomprehensibly transcendeth all things whatsoever. And though He be ineffable, and far above all comprehension, because He is infinite, yet He is most loving, most condescending, most familiar, and easily entreated, so that, though He cannot be understood, He can in a wonderful manner be loved.

For by love He is reached, by love He is retained ; nevertheless He is to be sought for by longing desires, He is to be moved

<sup>1</sup> Expecta, reexpecta ; modicum ibit, et post modicum redibit. How like this sweet urgency is to what we find in the '*De Imitatione Christi*,' lib. i. cap. 23, sec. 8 : Age, age nunc, carissime, quidquid agere potes.

by prayer, and is well pleased when expected. And if I have not said enough to satisfy thee, may He, Whom thou hast sought, satisfy thee ; and may He teach thee above all teachers, how He Himself is to be found.<sup>1</sup>

Such high and sacred converse between earnest and loving hearts is much to be valued and ever to be remembered. It often marks an epoch in the spiritual life, and is not unfrequently the commencement of a closer walk with God ; the making up of the mind to live for the future more with God and for God, with a resolute determination to be all that He would have us to be, and to do all that he would have us to do. In the preface to the book from which the above colloquy is taken, à Kempis intimates that he has recorded what he wished to store up, that in time of need he might find suitable matter to refresh himself when overcome by weariness or clouded by sorrow. And it seems probable that the fervour and influence of the conversation we have before us, left its impression upon him, was often recalled to his mind, and not unfrequently incited him to the keeping up the interior life with God.

I have said that à Kempis was well and fully employed day after day ; that time passed pleasantly and profitably with him whilst there was little to disturb the smooth tenor of his outward life. There were, however, some few changes and incidents, that from time to time broke in upon the regular routine of the daily tasks and duties which occupied him and the frequently recurring exercises of devotion. Many of the Brothers one after another left them, and were removed to other places, or were advanced from the Brother-houses at Deventer to be Canons Regular, or were called to assist in the establishment of new houses rising up in various parts. The departure of a Brother, again and again, whilst à Kempis was staying with them, caused for the time some little excitement—for great was the fraternal charity that existed among them ; but still whilst they missed their sweet presence and

<sup>1</sup> Thom. à Kemp. *Soliloquium Animæ*, cap. i.

society, it served to enlarge their sympathies and awaken new and pleasing interests. These Brothers were going forth into the world, equipped for the service of their Lord, to be witnesses for Christ; and each fresh sphere to which they went was an additional centre of new life to which those left behind might turn. Moreover, other young men were coming fresh into their ranks, and supplying the vacant places of those who had left, which again caused new interests to arise.

Then, again, during à Kempis's stay among the Brothers at Deventer, a grievous pestilence broke out once or twice in the city and the surrounding neighbourhood, and during the last two years he was there it raged so violently that it carried off no less than ten of the Brothers out of the larger or new house of Florentius, obliging him to remove with the rest of the household to Amersford for a time, though it seems to have spared the inhabitants of the older and smaller house where à Kempis resided.<sup>1</sup> Among those who died were two or three that à Kempis particularly loved and esteemed, and whose deaths seem to have made a great impression upon him, since it wholly determined him to give himself up for the remainder of his days to a religious life.

A Kempis himself, also on one occasion, whether earlier or later on, is not recorded, fell seriously ill. It does not appear what his sickness was, but though it probably did not proceed from the epidemic which prevailed at one time or another, yet it was of so dangerous a character that his life seems to have been in peril, so much so that Florentius called in the aid of a worthy friend of his, who was skilful as a physician, though he had become a clergyman; the name of this person was Everard de Eza, curé of St. Almelo, a small town about twenty-two miles from Deventer. This illness, whatever it was, seems to have been a lingering one, or to have returned upon him frequently, so that it proved a great trial to à Kempis,

<sup>1</sup> Thom. à Kemp. *Vita Hen. Brune*, no. vi. sec. viii. p. 92. Also, *Vita Lubert Berner*, no. v. sec. 22, p. 80.



and often depressed him.<sup>1</sup> It did not, however, damp his love and devotion to Christ, but served rather to draw him nearer to his dear Lord, since it called forth in larger measure the exercise of faith in the superintending care and goodness of the Almighty. When he came near, once and again, to the dark valley and shadow of death, it led him, while yet young in years, to reflect upon the uncertainty of life; and as for awhile he knew not whether he should be summoned hence, or spared, he felt the more resolved in his mind that should God raise him up again to health and strength, his life should be devoted to Him and to His service. He could not, however, always keep his mind collected: anxious thoughts would arise at times, and his sickness brought him very low. Nevertheless, he was not left desolate; there were loving friends about him that ministered to his necessities with gentle hands and tender hearts. But still it was a season to be much remembered by him, and we naturally look for some traces of it in his works.

It would be interesting to know what his thoughts were at this time when God was thus dealing with his soul, and bringing him early near to Himself, through the furnace of affliction. It is deemed very probable that in one or two of the earlier chapters of his '*Soliloquy of the Soul*,' he describes the feelings and sentiments which pervaded his mind during the period of his illness, which, being then put down in a rough draft, he afterwards corrected and amended when he was induced to collect a number of such papers together, some years later, and embody them in a complete treatise. For though it is not expressly named when the words were written, or to what particular event or period of his early history they belong, they do nevertheless fit in most suitably with this season of sickness. And here I may say—speaking generally—that it would be a pity to be deprived of knowing the occasions when some of his very beautiful and salutary

<sup>1</sup> See the *Chronicles* by Thomas à Kempis, continued after those of St. Agnes, chap. vii. p. 163.

meditations were brought forth at special moments of his life, when his soul was moved to utterance and to find some vent for its pious emotions, because the times to which they belong are not exactly specified, when by a little consideration of the subjects they can be adjusted in many instances to their proper places, without much fear of going very far wrong.

Before drawing attention, however, to the passages I have alluded to, I must here make a few observations about the 'Soliloquy of the Soul,' from which I have already made some extracts. If we may judge from what is said, it seems probable that this treatise of Thomas à Kempis was written before the books of the 'De Imitatione Christi;' that it was one of his earliest productions, and contains the devout outpourings and aspirations of his soul, his meditations, experiences, and reflections in religion, as they arose from time to time during his latter years at Deventer and his first years at Mount St. Agnes. His contemporary biographer makes mention of the work before any of the books of the 'De Imitatione Christi.' And he does this in such a manner as to lead us to the conclusion I have just stated. Probably at the suggestion, and by the desire and help of his brother John, he was in the first instance induced to make them known for the benefit of others, that the work might be as a guide or manual of spiritual direction, for assisting other Christian pilgrims when passing through like trials or conditions of soul. And this was done without any desire or aim that such devout papers might be known as the outcome of his own heart rather than of any other person.

A careful study of the work also, in the subjects he treats upon and the peculiar wording of his phrases, would suggest a similar inference to what has been advanced. It is not unlikely that, from the acceptance which this devotional book met with, and the value that was set upon it, from its being found of great use to those aspiring after a closer walk with God, he was led on to write other words of spiritual wisdom, to take more pains still with

what he wrote, to put his whole soul into what he did, to concentrate into a few sacred treatises the very essence of what he knew by experience and had learnt among the Brothers concerning the spiritual life of the soul, and a man's advancement towards the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ, and that this eventually resulted in the production of the '*De Imitatione Christi*.' We would here also observe in passing that the Antwerp edition of Thomas à Kempis's works is much more to be depended upon than the version of Sommalius, who has confessedly altered in many places, small though the alterations may be, the text of Thomas à Kempis.

There is a great likeness between the '*Soliloquy of the Soul*' by à Kempis and that most instructive autobiography, the '*Confessions of St. Augustine*.' In both we have severally the deep thoughts that stirred their inmost souls, the struggles and trials, the resolves and entreaties of an awakened desire after God. True it is that their experience of life and the manner of their being drawn nearer to God were different. Thomas à Kempis had, perhaps, not such a highly cultured mind as St. Augustine, neither had he gone astray from God in early life, as the latter had. Moreover, we are able in the '*Confessions of St. Augustine*' to fix the very period of his life with some exactness, when he underwent all that he tells us of, and the whole of his thoughts at this time are set before us in a consecutive manner; but in the '*Soliloquy of the Soul*' the religious sentiments of Thomas à Kempis are given in an unconnected way, and appear to have been put down from time to time in the earlier stages of his religious career, when specially moved thereto. Moreover, while Thomas à Kempis, as has been intimated, purposely tries to keep himself out of view that it might not be known save but to a few that he was the author of what he wrote, St. Augustine has no such reserve, but openly declares that what he said respecting the state of his soul applied to himself alone, both before and after, as well as during his conversion. All the same, both of the authors

let us into the secrets of their hearts, in the most momentous and searching periods of their history, giving us the unfolding of the spiritual life within them, and how God dealt with them in drawing them to Himself. Both of them were pre-eminent in the religious life, and both most effective teachers of Christianity, to whom the Church of Christ will ever stand deeply indebted.

In confirmation of this as respects à Kempis, his contemporaneous biographer leads us to the conclusion that the expressions contained in the 'Soliloquy' were in truth drawn from his experience, for thus he speaks of him: 'And because *he began in early years* to gather riches, not the perishing riches of unrighteousness, but durable substance, and to lay up treasures of wisdom and righteousness, therefore he obtained a good name, that was as most precious ointment. And those words of the prophet were fulfilled in him, which say, "Blessed is the man that shall bear the yoke of the Lord from his youth up. He shall sit alone and hold his peace; because he hath lifted himself above himself."<sup>1</sup> For that this was verily fulfilled in him, *is plainly to be seen in several of his treatises, and especially in that of the "Soliloquy of the Soul,"* which he composed; wherein Christ, the Bridegroom, is speaking with his soul, as it were to His bride. And there it may be seen, how he sat solitary and kept silence, because he had borne this yoke of Christ from his youth, and how sitting thus alone, he lifted himself *above himself.*'<sup>2</sup>

Thomas à Kempis also in his preface to the 'Soliloquy' intimates that what is written is applicable to the author, then anonymous; for, after alluding to the peculiar style of composition he has adopted, he speaks in deprecating tones of his ability for writing, and says in his own quaint but pleasing fashion:—'I ask, then, none of my readers to be moved to wrath with the writer, because it hath pleased him to discourse after this manner with himself. Let him pardon also the imperfection of composition, and the simplicity

<sup>1</sup> Sam. iii. 27, 28.

<sup>2</sup> *Biog. Synchr. Vita et opéra Thom. à Kemp.* edit. Nuremb. 1494.



of diction, considering with himself that not things artificially devised, but pure and simple, are the more pleasing to God.' And then he concludes his preface with an address to God, to accept the work, imperfect though he acknowledges it to be, and with a beautiful prayer, in which his love for the Word of God shines forth, he entreats that he may be blessed with a tranquil mind, so as inwardly to receive its divine truths. I cannot omit therefore giving the whole of it here, since it will be valued by many :—

And since human judgments, however probable, are apt to err, I, a suppliant disciple, have recourse to Thee, O Omnipotent God, and Father of Lights, and present this Soliloquy before Thee, that Thou mayest approve what is worthy, blame what is amiss, and show me, or some other faithful servant, those things displeasing to Thee, that they may be more correctly and clearly set forth.

And I entreat Thee also, O Holy Father, vouchsafe to me, the least of Thy servants, time and opportunity for tarrying in the most pleasant pastures of the Holy Scriptures, which are and will be my most cherished delight, until the day of Eternity dawns, and the shadow of mortality is gone down. Remove from me useless cares, temporal loves, hurtful passions, and other causes that keep me back from the desired rest. For it behoves the mind to be free and tranquil which desires to meditate on things inward and divine. That I may, therefore, be enabled to attain to such a state of mind, graciously pour out upon me, and fill me with the benediction of Thy heavenly sweetness, so that I may speak of Thy glory, and obtain some grace of spiritual consolation for myself.<sup>1</sup>

For the various reasons given above then, the 'Soliloquy of the Soul' may be regarded as a veiled autobiographical account of à Kempis's earlier interior life, its lights and shades, its joys and sorrows, its fears and aspirations.

I now proceed to give a few passages, containing his meditation on a text of scripture well suited for the time of sickness which has been mentioned. The heading of the Chapter (V.) is, 'On the shortness and misery of the present life,' and the text which he puts at the beginning—as he usually does—is this : 'Make me to know the brief number (paucitatem) of my days.'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Prologus in Soliloquium Animæ.*

<sup>2</sup> Ps. xxxix, 4.

As long as I am in this world, I am not clean. And as long as I remain here, I am a poor stranger and guest upon the earth. I brought nothing into this world, and I shall carry nothing out, because naked I came into it, and naked shall I return hence. As a shadow which passeth away, and as rain which is dried up by the wind, and as a guest of one night, I shall presently pass away.

All this present life is as one most brief night. Few and evil are my days ; and after a little while they will be ended, and they will be as though they had never been. When man is dead, what but vileness remains ? Who will care for a foetid corpse ? Who will ask after the absent dead who, when living, was esteemed of no account ?

The remembrance of man upon the earth is short, both among his acquaintance and strangers. But the just shall be had in everlasting remembrance ; because, when he dies he will be for ever united to God.

Happy then is he who places not his hope in man, nor rejoices too much in the things or beauty of the world, but has his heart fixed in heaven, because all here below is fleeting and vain. Count up all from the beginning of the world until now, and tell me, I pray thee, where are they ? And, how long, thinkest thou, will those endure, whom thou now seest or hearest alive ? Declare his concerning all, that every man living is vanity.<sup>1</sup>

The rhyme is very observable in these lines : thus to accord with 'mortuo,' we have 'aliquo ;' and 'justus' with 'conjunctus ;' 'homine' with 'specie ;' and 'fixum' with 'vanum ;' and 'sunt' with 'durabunt.' In the following passages, let the reader also notice how our devout author rises up above the trials and vanities of this mortal life to Christ, his hope and joy ; and, putting aside all the temptations and allurements of the world, resolves to perfect holiness in the fear of God, to bear with cheerfulness what God appoints, and to look forward to the happy hour of his deliverance.

Oh how much more do good men patiently endure this poor miserable life, this frail and sad life, than love it ! And though the wicked love it much, yet they cannot long remain in it. Oh ! when will it end, and when shall all this universal vanity of the

<sup>1</sup> *Soliloquium Animæ*, ch.v. sec. I.

world cease? But the time will come, when all the elect, who now oftentimes mourn that they are so far from the Kingdom of Christ, shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption.<sup>1</sup>

Would that all this world were withered up in my heart, and that the Lord my God, the immortal Bridegroom, were alone sweet unto me !

Truly the fleeting joy of this life is a deceitful and most bitter cup. Let them drink who will, because they all hereafter shall pay a terrible penalty. And the more any one may have been inebriated with it, so much the sharper will he feel his pangs, since all the joy of this world will pass away swifter than the wind, and leave pains and burdens for its lovers.

Depart from me, then, thou false glory of the world, and all foolish delight in carnal things. Thou allurest and deceivest many, but in the end thou leavest and sinkest them. Woe to those that trust thee ! woe to them that are then drowned by thee !

Come and be with me, holy abasement, and full contempt of all the pomps of the world ; do not willingly depart from me, wholesome remembrance of my pilgrimage.

What am I but dust and ashes ? And whither do I tend but to the earth ? Oh how wretched I become, and how justly sorrowful I am, when I ponder upon my pilgrimage, because I know not after what manner I shall end it.

If I live well, and persevere, there is no need to fear an evil death. But who can glory in a good life and an irreproachable conscience ? He who knoweth that he is such let him glory in the Lord, and compassionate me, a poor sinner.

It is no pleasure to me to live, because misery presses on every side. An evil conscience makes a man fear to die, because he cannot answer to God for one act in a thousand. Unlike to this trepidation is the word of the Prophet, when he says : ' My heart is ready, O God, my heart is ready.'

O Lord God of my salvation, give me a good end of my life, and prolong not the days of my mourning. Sorrowful came I into this prison, and I shall not go hence without fear.

Long appears this life to me, but this comes from frequent

<sup>1</sup> Here are three lines ending severally with 'mundi,' 'electi,' and 'Christi.' There is, moreover, a certain degree of rhythm running through all these passages. And in such of Thomas à Kempis's writings where this is found, and where the rhyming is interspersed, the method of putting the words into verses has been adopted, as more in accordance with the spirit of the original, than continuing them in long paragraphs.

misery and sadness. For in fact it is not long, for time passes away swifter than the wind. But to him who is afflicted with sorrow and pain all time is long, and he reckons a day as a year. Therefore is this life wearisome to me, and it afflicts me the more grievously the more truly I know each of its miseries. And although some seasons of consolation and gladness intervene, yet it behoves me to consider whether they are from God or not.

If from God, I gladly accept them ; but how long they will continue I know not. Yet however short they are, they please and delight me. Would, my God, they flowed in more largely, and did not remain with me but some short hours.

But those that are not from God are worthless, and will quickly perish, although in appearance they seem pleasant and sweet. Thus this life passes away, always mixed with good and evil.

As long then as I am in this world, I am a poor pilgrim.<sup>1</sup> I cannot say that it satisfies me, because there is not a sufficiency of good in this present life ; but Thou, in Whom I believe, art my Good for which I long.

When then Thy glory hath appeared and filled me, I will confess to Thee, because it now altogether satisfies me. In the meantime, because this word is hidden from me, manifold sorrow compasseth my soul.

Therefore mindful of Thy Holy Word, I often say : ‘My soul is sorrowful even unto death.’ Good were it for me if this hour had passed away, and no pain or grief were to lay hold upon me. But I pray Thee, O Lord, let Thy mercy preserve me.<sup>2</sup>

The wearisome days of a lingering sickness were peculiarly trying to this young athlete in the Kingdom of Christ, and he had need to strengthen himself continually in God. It seemed as if God were chastening him as a son whom He had received, and had designed to fit for doing a peculiar work for Him. The sickness was doubtless sanctified to his spiritual advancement, since he sought God in it, and desired to be purified from all earthly attachments, and committed himself wholly to the disposal of the Divine Will, humbling and condemning himself. Hear, however, how he mourns in his prayer, as if deeply troubled in spirit ; for in another chapter he proceeds :—

<sup>1</sup> Pauper peregrinus sum. Thomas speaks of himself as, ‘Frater Peregrinus,’ in the prologue of his *Sermons to Novices*.

<sup>2</sup> Thom. a Kemp. *Soliloquium Animæ*, ch. v. sec. 3.



‘Bring my soul out of prison!’<sup>1</sup> The severity of pain suffers me not to remain silent. For why do I remain here longer? I know not even that I shall be well here. I improve too slowly; and would that I did not feel so weary.

What a good thing Thou wouldst do to me, O Lord, if Thou wouldst shortly take me hence, lest it should become worse with me. My life is breathed forth with pain, and does not amend under treatment.

Since Thou delayest, I do not amend thereby, but even abuse Thy long suffering. And when Thou correctest, I hardly endure it, because Thou pursuest as it were but dry stubble.

Why then dost Thou not take away Thy servant? Why is it that he still occupies the ground? That is to say, Wherefore does he dwell with good people, and does not amend his life and conversation? Why does he unworthily and hurtfully occupy the place of another better disposed, and conducts himself so negligently and coldly? And pondering over this sad matter very much, I speak in the ears of my God.

But, O good Lord, do not cry out against me in Thine anger, ‘Cut down the tree, and cast it into the fire.’ I accuse my infirmity before Thee, that Thou mayest pardon me when I confess.

It is for me to accuse myself, for Thee to forgive. It is for me to weep and grieve bitterly, and for Thee mercifully to comfort me. Either then, O Lord God, grant me more grace in this life, or take me quickly from this world, lest the cleft be made worse. For to live long, and not to amend one’s life, is but to heap up punishment.

Nor can such a life which knows no advancement, and does not deplore its deflections, please me; for he who lives holily and righteously, laments his deficiencies whatever they are, and has always an eager desire that he may increase more and more in virtue and grace.

But what shall he do who is conscious that he fails daily, and that his flesh riseth against his spirit? who sometimes, overcome by weariness, or rendered cold through carelessness of time, already ceases to fight; or, throwing aside his spiritual arms, follows the lusts of the flesh, and goes whithersoever his own pleasure draws him?

Such an one, alas, O Lord God! approacheth nigh unto the gates of death, and while that he liveth in the flesh endangers the death of the soul. Oh, how greatly everyone must be in fear of

<sup>1</sup> Ps. cxlii. 7.

being seduced and mastered by the enemy ! No one is safe, no one is pure, yea there is frailty in all.

But, O Lord, Who canst do all things, and knowest all things, do Thou resuscitate the broken in heart, and cleanse the unclean from every stain, and grant him inwardly a new spirit, that all coldness and languor may depart from him, that all spiritual fervour may return, and that Thy love may remain unchangeable to the end.

He who is impeded by his own weight, needeth Thy assistance only. Moreover, he cannot of himself cast away the burden of his sins, until Thou from heaven bestow grace strong enough to break the hard bonds of his passions ; the which I beseech Thee to grant me, for without grace it is impossible to live a good life, and without it Eternal Life cannot be attained.

But that I now live in the flesh is no consolation to me, since death were better for me than life. Wherefore ? Because on account of this life I am kept far off from the Life Eternal, which cannot come unless death destroys the present, and death itself is at the same time destroyed.

Therefore my desires rise upwards, and my heart craving, sighs mightily after Eternal Rest, and exclaims : ‘ It is enough for me, O Lord, take away my soul, which Thou hast redeemed with Thy Blood.’<sup>1</sup>

The bodily infirmities which pressed sorely upon Thomas unfitted him for doing any of his duties aright, and the feeling possessed him that his life on earth was no longer good for anything. And with that despondency which frequently overtakes those who have to fight long against the inroads of sickness, he longed to be delivered from this bondage of corruption ; and yet, with resignation and holy fear, he was willing to wait his appointed time, fearing that he might not yet be ready for death, and desiring that God’s will might be wrought in him. And he cries out in broken accents :—

Open the gates of Thy Kingdom, and bring in a poor pilgrim (peregrinum) returning unto Thee from exile. Hear me, O Lord, and loose me from the chains of the body ! What more shall I do here ? I am useful neither to myself nor others.

For what then do I live ? burdensome to myself, and a weariness to others. What shall be done concerning me, I know not,

<sup>1</sup> *Soliloquium Animæ*, ch. vi.

O Lord, unless Thou hast provided something better for me ; why are my longings delayed ?

Acquiescence to Thy decree is good ; but I find so much evil in myself, that to live in the world is a burden and weariness to me. For I sin daily, and only add sin to sin, and I do not repent as it becomes me to do.

If then I were to be set free from this body of sin, and united to Thee in Thy Kingdom, I should sin no more, nor should I offend Thee in anything, but should always be praising Thee.

Hitherto Thou bearest with me, and showest all long-suffering. I acknowledge my fault, because on account of my sins I am not permitted to enter the Kingdom : for nothing unclean shall enter into it.

But when shall I be without sin ? when shall I become completely clean, so that I shall not fear to be shut out, but shall the rather rejoice on being admitted ?

If I advance not more fervently, if I am not more solicitous than I have been, I fear that my hope will be small indeed.

But do Thou, O Lord, Who wouldst not that any should perish, but that all should be saved, grant me more grace for the amendment of life ; and to the hope of heavenly good, give the spirit of internal fruitfulness.

Never let my heart crave after carnal joy, but look forward to death in fear. Let no creature or care hold me back, but let Thy wished-for Presence draw me on and comfort me.

Blessed is he who looked for Thee, O Lord, but more blessed is he who has already departed from this wicked world, for he shall neither sorrow nor fear any more.

During this period of lengthened sickness the Curé of St. Almelo visited him frequently, and spoke words of spiritual comfort and divine wisdom to him, as well as prescribed for his bodily health, for like Luke, the beloved Physician, he ministered to the wants of the soul, as well as attended to the cure of the body, and gave the young man much holy and affectionate advice, to strengthen his hope in God, and his resolution to persevere in holiness of life, should his heavenly Father mercifully raise him up again.

Thomas à Kempis long remembered his kindness ; and many years afterwards, when the good and benevolent man died, he speaks of him with grateful reverence, and gives us some interesting particulars of his life, which I purpose relating in another chapter.

## CHAPTER VIII.

A memorial of Everard de Eza by à Kempis—Everard's conversion through the preaching of Gerard—He afterwards devotes himself to the Ministry of the Word—Intercessions of à Kempis in the prospect of death—The life of Florentius—A tribute of respect to his memory by à Kempis—His name symbolic of his character—His decision to embrace a holy Life—His great influence with young men—His endurance of opprobrium—Invited by Gerard to come to Deventer—Urged to become a priest—His bodily infirmities—His singleness of heart—The simplicity of his attire—His diligent use of time—His rendering common service to all—His kindness to the poor.

IT is well to preface the account, which Thomas à Kempis gives us of the excellent and philanthropic physician who attended him in his sickness, with the short remark, that his name will appear again as intimately connected in works of charity and piety with the Brothers of Common Life, and that he was consequently more mixed up with the life of our author than would appear from the passing allusion to the kindness which he personally received from him.

In the year 1404, on April 1, the Reverend Master Everard de Eza died. He frequently undertook, out of kindness, the healing of many sick persons, and especially of the poor, free of charge. He was also the founder, and provided the means for the support, of the new monastery of Canons Regular, called 'the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Wood,' near Northorn, and lived in connection with the Brethren. An account of the consecration of the chapel of this monastery is given by à Kempis in a previous chapter of the 'Chronicles,' and we are there told that Everard caused several clerks (clerici) living with him to be invested as canons in the said monastery. This man, continues à Kempis, was held in great repute as a physician, was honoured by the better class, feared by the worldly, beloved



by the religious, and was greatly famed for some distance throughout the whole country round about. He was an intimate friend of Florentius, the Vicar of Deventer, and was pleased when called upon to visit him, and was not unfrequently present with him during the seasons of his illness, and, skilfully prescribing for him, wrought his cure. He was wont to refer to this, because, he said, it seemed above human nature that a man of so debilitated a frame could have lived so long if it had not been for God's sustaining providence. They frequently renewed their acquaintance and mutually benefited each other, so that they appeared to be as two luminaries in the world, and as brethren dwelling together in unity, and comforting one another.

But it was not always so. Far otherwise. Thomas à Kempis tells us how his conversion was begun, and how, by God's co-operating grace, it was fully confirmed to the effecting of his salvation. It was on this wise : When the venerable Gerard the Great preached the Word of God, not only in Deventer, but in the country round about, Everard heard of his fame, and seems to have been incensed by it, for, puffed up with the wisdom of the world, he hastened to be present on one occasion when Gerard preached, not out of love, but for the sake of curiosity, wishing to ascertain what his doctrines were, and whether his preaching was in accordance with his fame ; and not, therefore, because he thirsted for righteousness, but rather because he desired to get some occasion to find fault with the discourse. He did not, therefore, appear openly in the congregation among the simple folks, but kept himself hidden, as it were, behind a pillar.

But behold, the Almighty, Who knoweth the hearts of men, and from whose face no one can hide himself, filled the discourse of the preacher with sharp arrows for him, which secretly pierced the heart of the critical auditor, and so filled him with compunction that, casting away the wantonness of his former vanity and pride, he soon became a devout disciple of the preacher. For when the discourse was ended, he went to the man of God and told him how

the Lord had dealt with him ; by what manner he had endeavoured to conceal himself from observation ; and how he now desired the preacher to look into the hidden places of his heart, and know his most secret thoughts. Master Gerard therefore received him affectionately, and confirmed him in his resolution to lead a new life, until at length he became a companion and coadjutor in preaching the Gospel. But it was not long after his conversion that Master Gerard took his departure to the Lord.

After his death, the old enemy endeavoured to excite not a little animosity against the devout disciples, but the grace of God abounded towards them, giving them patience and constancy. And when Master Everard, whose conversion was not yet known to many of the 'devotees' at Deventer, wished at the first to join himself to the disciples of Christ dwelling in the house of Florentius, the Brethren were greatly troubled at beholding his face. For it appears that Everard had used violence against some of them aforetime, and a report of his bitter animosity filled their hearts with fear, as if his coming among them foreboded some evil ; and, as Thomas relates the circumstance, they took to flight, as lambs before the wolf, and rushed to certain hiding-places in the house. Master Florentius also was afraid of him, not knowing his intention, for he had formerly been extremely harsh to some of the devout Brethren, and had opposed them. Therefore he said to Father Florentius, 'Why is it that the Brethren fly away in this manner ?' The other replied, 'Because they know not for what intent thou comest.' Then said Everard to him, 'I come to you that I may learn to amend my life.'

Florentius evidently doubted his sincerity, and held back as if he suspected that it was but some crafty design of his to get the Brethren into his power ; and therefore he gave him no encouragement. After some further parley, Master Everard at length spoke of his serious determination, and with some protestation said, 'If you do not believe my word, at least believe my actions. Accommodate me with a chamber among you for a time, as I desire, and prove

me during that period, what spirit I am of.' The Brethren therefore at length received him among them, and appointed him a chamber; and there he lived for some length of time in good report, giving evident proof of his being fully converted; and after tarrying among them many days, he became learned in the law of the Lord and in the sacred Scriptures, as in like manner he had been aforetime learned and celebrated in the art of medicine.

At length he began to comprehend what the will of the Lord was respecting himself, and how he was to serve Him, and then began to exercise his heavenly vocation. Being instructed both by the example and counsels of Florentius, he took his departure, and began to gather pious clerics and laymen at his own house at St. Almelo, after the pattern set him in the Brother-house at Deventer, and lived with them many years in like holy discipline. By God's help also he procured a site upon which to build the monastery before named; and when he had placed several of the Brethren there, he made large gifts of property to it to meet the expenses, as well as of gold and silver things, books, and other necessary articles for use. The monastery was founded in 1394, just ten years after the death of Gerard, and ten years before his own death. He was buried in his own church at St. Almelo, where he had preached to the people many years, leaving behind him a good remembrance among the 'devotees,' whom he paternally loved and cherished.<sup>1</sup>

Such is the short record which à Kempis gives of Everard de Eza, who won a lasting regard in his heart. In speaking of him as his benefactor, he adds that he not only cured him, but had done this in such wise that for a long time afterwards he had not been oppressed with the like sickness.

Those who care to follow à Kempis through this conflict of soul that befel him in the freshness of his early manhood will find much matter for reflection and profit in

<sup>1</sup> See *Chronicles*, by Thomas à Kempis, following those of Mt. St. Agnes, but not immediately connected with the monastery.

a paper written by him on 'The Desire for a Happy Death.' The words seem to have reference to the period just before his recovery. It is a record of a momentous crisis in his spiritual history. He still looks forward to death as coming to him sooner or later, but now with a cheering hope, to deliver him from many evils, and as a passage into a life of blessedness ; and he makes use of its apparent nearness to stir himself up to be in greater readiness for the change. The paper to which we refer is as follows :—

'Thou, O Lord, art my hope from my youth up.'<sup>1</sup> In this hope I flee to Thee for refuge, when my last hour and the time of my dissolution shall have come. Oh that I could have been well prepared, that I might die in the hope of this grace ! Oh that by a happy transition I had ended my last days, and laid aside the burden of this body ; how many dangers and fears should I then have escaped !

Happy is he whom Thou hast chosen and received to Thyself ; who, having already laid aside the body, has passed from this world to the Father, from exile to the kingdom, from a prison to a palace, from darkness to light, from death to life, from dangers to security, from labour to rest, and from all misery to perpetual blessedness.

Happy is the soul, which already enjoys its reward, rejoicing in Thee, the Lord, its God. But alas for me ! because my sojourn is prolonged even until now. How graciously and mercifully wouldst Thou have dealt with me, if Thou hadst called me sooner, and permitted me to come unto Thee, that where Thou art, thither also I might be.

Ah ! if Thou hadst taken me sooner out of this world, when I knew not as yet its defilements, and when I feared also to sin in little matters : what a blessing Thou wouldst have bestowed upon me ! But now by living longer I have wandered further from Thee, and offended in many ways.

Alas me, what have I done ? I have followed the passions of the flesh, I have pleased myself with vanities, I have forsaken virtue, I have not kept innocency, I have added sins to sins, and oh ! bitterness of grief, I have experienced what I have read, 'Woe to the wicked in his wickedness.'

With much ado at length I returned ; slowly I began ; I hastened not in my return ; I was not eager in advancement ; I increased

<sup>1</sup> Ps. lxxi. 5.



not in fervour, and, far worse, became cold after former warmth. Hence also I often feared to die, because when urged by conscience I lived not as I ought.

But on account of the dangers of temptations, that the last error might not be worse than the first, I have frequently longed for death, and said, Oh, that I had already died in grace, that I might not be afflicted with so many evils upon earth !

Oh, if God had deigned to take me away ere now, and had put an end to all my labours, how well would it have been with me ! But all things are determined according to Thy Will, O Lord. If Thou dost decree to do what I ask, it will be done forthwith ; but if not, Thy will be done.

I can make known unto Thee my desires, and the calamities which I suffer—not as if Thou didst not know, but that, by such discourse, I may receive some refreshment for my soul. I know that I am not yet well prepared, for my conscience hath hitherto feared much.

And what wonder that I, a sinner, fear, since even many holy Fathers have feared ; and Thy judgments are different from ours. But how shall I prepare myself ? It were undoubtedly good for me to prepare myself better against that day, as I know not whether it will be to-day or to-morrow.

I will more firmly renew my resolution, I will deplore my past negligences, I will offer myself wholly as a sacrifice unto Thee, and I will trust myself for ever to Thy mercy.

O Lord my God ! all my works remain through Thy mercy, and they have no merit of their own, unless Thy boundless goodness and compassion be at hand. And this is my hope, and all my confidence.

But how is it with a good and unspotted conscience ? What says the chaste and devout soul ? ‘Come,’ it says, ‘Lord Jesus ; come, and do not tarry : loose the bands of my wickedness, break the chains, bring out the bound from the prison-house, from the lake of misery and from the mire of abomination.’

Whilst waiting, I have looked for Thee ; incline Thee unto me and hear me. Leave me no longer in the world. Let it be enough that I have contended up to this present ; that I have been an exile so long ; that I have not been enabled to enjoy Thee, nor to behold Thee face to face.

Now at length grant that I may be a partaker of the wished-for joy, which is bounded by no end, and clouded by no weariness. Show me Thy face which the Angels ever see ; let Thy voice which they hear without intermission, sound in my ears.

Come, Lord Jesus, and take me out of a strange land ; recall the outcast to his native country ; and restore the fallen to his former state. Come, good Redeemer, make me a participator of Thy Eternal Glory.

It is time for me to return to Thee ; it is time for Thee to commit my body to the earth from which it was taken. I do not care where it be placed, or how it is treated, only let the spirit be safe, and come unto Thee.

Let it be well with my soul, which I commend unto Thee ; and may my flesh rest in hope, to be raised again at the last day. For wherever it be buried, it cannot be removed or hidden from Thee.

Take me away from among men, and unite me to the society of Thy saints. I am wearied of this temporal life ; the day of eternal brightness alone delights me.

Let not the old serpent oppose me, when I pass out of Egypt ; and let not the enemy cry out against me in the gate ; let not his dismal image affright, nor the horror of death overwhelm me.

Let Thy holy angels stand by, may they strongly assist, and bravely protect me, and gently, tenderly receive me, and carry me with exultation to the heavenly Paradise. May the glorious Mother of God, the Virgin Mary, and all the heavenly host be present !

And do Thou, O Good, Sweet Jesus—the best of all, give me the joy of Thy countenance, and cast me not away from among Thy beloved saints ; but consider or remember, O Son of God, that Thou hast redeemed me from the enemy by Thy precious Blood.

Of Thy mercy and goodness receive me into glory ; for with longing I have desired to eat the Passover with Thee. Oh ! happy day of my much longed-for reward ! Oh ! blissful hour of blessed departure, how have I longed for thee, and had thee ever before my eyes.

What harm now have tribulations and hardships in the world done me ? What injury have contempt, and labour, and humiliation for Thy Name's sake ? Thou hast been my life, and now to die will be gain ; and to be with Thee in Thy kingdom far better.

Praise and glory be unto Thee, Who art the Life of the living, the hope of the dying, the Salvation and Rest of all them that come unto Thee !<sup>1</sup>

It should be observed in passing that, when preparing

<sup>1</sup> *Soliloquium Animæ*, ch. vii.

this paper for the benefit of others, while à Kempis made use of the outpourings of his own soul before God in his sickness when hanging between life and death, which he had treasured up, he had probably added to it such words and lamentations as had come from some of the devout Brethren, who, as we shall shortly see, were called away by God before he left Deventer. And this was done, if we may judge from what he writes, that he might afterwards have by him fitting words that might be useful to himself also, not merely as a memorial of the spiritual trial he had passed through when he had, as it were, looked death in the face, but that he might have suitable aspirations wherewith he might come before the Lord, whenever his last change should come ; his object being that, when through pining sickness or pain of body his mind might be distracted, so that he could not compose his soul to address God as he would desire, he could then turn to these outpourings of the heart, as the very expressions he would wish to offer up to God in his last moments. That this was his design in composing and preserving many of the papers contained in the 'Soliloquy' to have them in readiness for his use on such an occasion, and on others when he might desire to direct aright and strengthen his soul, is evident from what he says in the preface, where he states that he had stored up these devout sentences that he might have matter at hand, 'suitable in time of need to refresh my heart overcome by weariness or clouded by sorrow.'

Gradually à Kempis recovered his health and resumed his former occupations, joining as aforetime in the religious services of the Brotherhood. His illness had however been sanctified to his advancement in Godliness, and was one of the means used by God to prepare his servant for future usefulness.

Whilst writing on that portion of the life of Thomas à Kempis which he spent at Deventer, I must narrate the account which he gives us of the Life of Father FLORENTIUS RADEWIN, who did more than any one to form his spiritual character, to establish him in an entire devotion of

himself to God, and to urge him to the attainment of Christian perfection. I have already had occasion frequently to allude to Florentius ; his character, therefore, brightened by the beauty of holiness, will to some degree be anticipated by the reader. But Thomas dwells upon it, and upon the many little incidents of his life, which came under his notice or which he heard respecting him, at greater length in a separate memoir, and with peculiar affection : I must not therefore omit to give in some more complete manner a biographical sketch of this saintly man, to whom Thomas à Kempis owed so much, and who was a spiritual Father to him.

Though Gerard the Great was the originator of the great Spiritual revival, and the Founder of 'the Brothers of Common Life,' Florentius was not merely his *Fidus Achates* and successor, but the main-spring and soul of these religious Communities to which Thomas à Kempis belonged for more than seventy years.<sup>1</sup> He was the flower and model of the devout life to which all the Brethren looked up, and by whom they were continually incited to great endeavours after a conformity to the likeness of Christ. 'The apostolic simple-mindedness and dignity,' says one, 'the urbanity, gentleness, and self-sacrificing activity for the common weal which characterise this person, inspired Thomas with a boundless admiration for him. Of this, in his life of Florentius, itself the noblest monument of affectionate reverence for the departed, he relates many characteristic and affecting traits.' In the quaint Prologue with which Thomas introduces his life, he shows us how closely he was allied to him, and that he was in a position to give much accurate information respecting him ; and, while speaking in the most reverential and affectionate terms of his spiritual Master, we notice traces of his own sweet humility and loving gratitude.

<sup>1</sup> Ullmann says, 'Florentius may be considered as the second founder of the society, and contributed even more than Gerard himself to the full development of its institutions.' In this sense Thomas styles the Brothers of Common Life, 'Florentigenæ.'



I, who have shown the fruitfulness of the good tree in Gerard, should now unfold the sweetness of the beautiful flower, in the pious Florentius, his disciple, who was the imitator, and the most ardent propagator, of the same Devotion; whose humble and gentle manners were truly the healing flowers for drooping souls, and whose sacred virtues supplied new strength and incitements.

But I implore you, good Brother, not to pervert the simplicity of my speech to the prejudice of the illustrious priest, who was the lover of humility and simplicity, but to regard with a reverent glance of consideration the good things you hear, and thoroughly digest them. Be like the very skilful bee, in sucking honey from the pretty flowers in the verdant fields, and, for the building up of your state and order, carefully sow, and hide in the little garden of your breast, the germs and patterns—like rose-flowers and fragrant lilies—of our beloved Father Florentius, that you may always progress in what is good, and become more ardent in the love of Christ. He was indeed a remarkable mirror of virtue, and a help in the attainment of the heavenly kingdom to all desirous of serving God. And I am able to speak of him so much the more confidently, since I knew him well, was often in his presence, and ministered to him.

Here a courteous Brother is brought in as saying to à Kempis:—‘The work which at my entreaty and that of others you have at once undertaken, may you accomplish to the glory of God! For it will be pleasant to our posterity to hear what bright lights have shone in our borders. Of whose merits also you will be a partaker, if you study to impart in love to others those things which you have freely received.’ Then Thomas is represented as replying:—

The work which I enter upon is a laborious one, and one which surpasses my knowledge and frail powers. For I would rather read in silence things spoken by others, than by my rusticity that barbarises, obscure the lustre of eminent men. But you who seek not for the ornaments of literature in writings, but for the virtues of good behaviour, must not despise the pearls in mean shells. For I confess that my want of experience renders me unfit for the writing the life of so great a Father; but I offer in the temple of God the hair of the goat for the covering of the roof of the tabernacle, since I possess no precious stones for

adorning the mantle of the priest. It seems to me, however, unworthy though I be, a shameful and ungrateful thing, that I should refrain from speaking of the virtues of so beloved a Father, who was so serviceable in his life to myself and many others ; who first led me to God, and at length guided me to the refuge of the monastery. Wherefore, as a deed of gratitude, and as a sweet memorial of him, I willingly repay him this good office, by composing this little work after his death.

I let my great love of the Reverend Father be some excuse, continues à Kempis, for presuming upon the work, since it is my wish that his memory may always and everywhere flourish among the 'Devotees.' May the Lord Jesus, who did not despise the two mites of the poor widow, hereafter reward my little self, because with pious intention I cast of my hand into His treasury, leaving higher things to the more learned. Knowing my own littleness, I submit to the correction of greater men. I beseech you, let your devout minds help me by prayer, and should you derive any edification from reading these writings, praise God for all His gifts, and be thankful even for small ones.

Florentius, whose life à Kempis now relates, was born at Leerdam in the year 1350, of respectable and opulent parents. His Father's name was Radewin ; and according to the manner of writing biography in those days, à Kempis adopts the method, which it will be remembered the biographers of à Kempis followed respecting him, of expatiating upon his character from the names he bore. For as parents are often apt to give such names to their children as are significant of those qualities which they hope will hereafter be displayed in their offspring, so à Kempis thinks it should be noted that this Florentius, the son of Radewin, proved himself worthy of the honourable names he bore, and that the same should be recorded, 'to the brighter manifestation of the glory of his heavenly Father, and the fame of his family.' For, if his life accords with the name, if his reputation was in keeping with the virtues, which is truly proved by the sincerity of his actions, it is a circumstance worthy of praise.

Florentius, continues Thomas, is a sweet name, to be uttered and called to remembrance by the pious ; for he behaved himself in such a manner whilst living, that he was held in the greatest

love and reverence by all—not only the religious, but by laymen as well. Beautifully, as one cutting flowers, is he named Florentius, on account of the liberal arts which he early acquired, in which he made so much progress and proficiency that he was called and made a master : or he may be called so on account of his knowledge of the Divine Law, and the books of Sacred Theology, which he read with more pleasure than other sciences, and which he dearly loved above all the treasures of the world, after the manner spoken of by the prophet in the Psalms, ‘Therefore I loved Thy commandments above gold and the topaz.’<sup>1</sup> But much more beautifully, as one possessing a flower, is he called Florentius, because he followed Christ, the Flower of all virtues and the Lover of purity, for the love of Whom he despised a flowery world, and firmly held the soundness of faith, and the unity of Catholic peace ; saying with the Bride in the Song of Songs, ‘My beloved is mine, and I am His ; He feedeth among the lilies ; I have laid hold of Him, and will not let Him go.’<sup>2</sup>

And in a still more sacred sense, and with more abundant fruitfulness, is he called Florentius, as a gatherer of flowers, since he gathered together many clerical Brethren in the primeval days of the Brotherhood, to flower with him in his own house : who contemning the vanity of the world, humbly and devoutly served the most High God in purity of life and brotherly love, after the manner sung of by holy David, in jubilant voice, ‘Behold, how good and pleasant it is to dwell together in unity.’<sup>3</sup> These he ruled and educated with so much discipline and spiritual fervour, that the House of Master Florentius was a school of Heavenly exercises, a mirror of sanctity, a model of virtue, a resort for the poor, a college for clerics, an edification for the laity, a refuge for the devout, and the beginning and advancement of every good thing. From this house certainly many honourable and learned men acquired a spirit of devotion, and like bees replenished with sweet honey, went forth from the full hive, to bear fruit in other places afar off ; and by the blessing of God vouchsafed unto them they gathered no little fruit, so that the words may be deservedly applied to them : ‘The *flowers* have appeared on our earth.’<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Psalm cxix. 127. In the Prayer-Book version the last word is translated ‘precious stone.’

<sup>2</sup> The Song of Solomon, ii. 16, and iii. 4, where the words in the latter passage are, ‘I found Him whom my soul loveth ; I held Him, and would not let Him go.’

<sup>3</sup> Psalm cxxxiii. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Canticles ii. 12. The remainder of the verse is, ‘The time of singing birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land.’

À Kempis then proceeds to the other name Florentius bore, and with fond affection delights to play upon it, and to find in it some traits of his master's excellency.

Let it not seem ridiculous, he says, if his paternal name be mystically explained, as this is thought to tend not a little to the praise of so great a man. Very fitly then is he named Radewinus as if he were a Divine ray (*radius Divinus*). By which name Christ is rightly understood, Who is the brightness of the Father, illuminating the world by the brightness of His wisdom, by His pure life, His true doctrine, His holy miracles, His many revelations. Who sent also His apostles as rays of the true sun to preach His Word throughout the whole world, to set a good example to all the faithful, and therefore addressed them after this manner, 'Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father, Who is in heaven.'<sup>1</sup> Well, therefore, has Florentius been called the Son of Radewinus, who having been begotten again by Christ unto a lively hope, was irradiated and inflamed by Him, so that despising earthly things he ardently loved heavenly things. Moreover if the same name Radewinus be transferred from the Latin to the Teutonic, it expresses *counsel* and *wine*. Which two words are alike most fitly applied to Florentius, since he forsook the *counsel* of worldly wisdom and submitted himself to the mandates of the Divine law, according to that passage of the Psalmist, 'For Thy testimonies also are my meditation, and Thy judgments my counsel.'<sup>2</sup> For instead of the vain and carnal delights, which the world offers to its lovers, Christ gave to him the enjoyment of inward pleasure, a pleasure which the world is unworthy to receive; and, He most powerfully filled his heart and soul with the *wine* of spiritual joy, especially whilst celebrating the Divine Mysteries, so that all his inward feelings glowed with the kindling of Divine love, and in the voice of exultation he rejoiced with the very devout Prophet, saying, 'My heart and my flesh have rejoiced in the living God.' For he was then so wholly collected within himself, and so carried by the Spirit above himself, as to be a living sacrifice, and well-pleasing unto God; and very faithfully interceded for the Holy Church, and with supplications for all people. In this solemn

<sup>1</sup> Matt. v. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm cxix. 24. Which in both versions are rendered, 'Thy testimonies also are my delight, and my counsellors.' But in the marginal reference it is, 'men of my counsel.'



Feast he tasted the God-made sweetness at its source,<sup>1</sup> and melting before the greatness of the Divine abundance, he meditated with deep gratitude upon these mystic words, 'How great is the multitude of Thy sweetness, O Lord, which Thou hast hidden in them that fear Thee.'<sup>2</sup>

Thomas à Kempis tells us that having touched lightly upon these points, he will now turn his pen to the subject in hand; and then follows various particulars respecting the life of Florentius. For the purpose of completing his studies the father of Florentius sent his son to the University of Prague, which was then celebrated as a seat of learning, to which scholars from remote parts proceeded. Here he applied himself with great diligence, made good progress, showed great proficiency, and became distinguished for his genius. He was beloved by his fellow-students and the attendants, and was reverent towards his masters. Afterwards, having received with honour the degree of 'Master,' he returned to his home and kindred, where he was gladly welcomed back.<sup>3</sup> He seems to have been highly esteemed, and his society much courted by his friends and neighbours. And this he well deserved, for his biographer tells us that Florentius was conspicuous for uprightness of disposition, and for geniality among his companions, that he was affable of speech, generous, of a comely form, slender in make and rather tall. As an illustration of his urbanity of manners before he embraced 'the religious life,' we are told, that on a certain occasion he was invited with several friends to be present at a marriage. And whilst travelling together he very promptly contrived something for their convenience, which at the same time afforded them some mirth. He speedily cut down some green boughs from the trees, with which, when

<sup>1</sup> 'Deificam in suo fonte dulcedinem.' *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Florentii*, ch. iii. sec. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm xxxi. 19. Let the reader turn to the fourteenth chapter of the fourth book of the *De Imitatione Christi*, and judge for himself if there is not here (and in other instances to which I shall allude) a beautiful illustration of its fervid words.

<sup>3</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Florentii*, ch. iv. sec. 1, 2.

joined together, he formed a kind of bower for them whilst sitting in the carriage, which shaded them from the sun's rays. This social incident, however, remarks his biographer, prefigured some good to be found in him, because he should, when by the grace of God he was changed into a spiritual man, invite more companions to accompany him to the nuptials of the heavenly citizens, where the immortal Bridegroom, JESUS CHRIST, feasts with all His saints for ever and ever. This afterwards proved very true in the case of many Brothers devoutly converted by him, as I have plainly seen with my own eyes, and as all Deventer knows.<sup>1</sup> God allowed him, observes Thomas, to mingle for some time in the world, and to experience its deceptive follies, but not finally to be endangered thereby, so that no one, desirous of being converted, should despair of pardon.

The circumstance which more immediately led him to decided, serious thoughts about religion and to devoting himself to God's service, was a merciful deliverance from an impending death, which is thus related. 'When descending into a deep valley—the road being very narrow and fenced in on both sides—a chariot followed him down the mountain with a great impetus, and being unable to turn aside, he was brought into great peril of his life. In this extremity he fled to the Divine arm for help, vowing, in a swift moment, to give himself to God's service if He should spare him. The Omnipotent God being thus invoked, the great favour of the Saviour was present. For he saw—wonderful to relate—as soon as he had called upon the Lord, the same chariot, he knew not how, precede him in the road in which he was going, and that all danger was removed. Which event seemed so miraculous to him, that he ascribed it altogether to God, who healeth those that are broken in heart, and delivereth out of every strait those that call upon Him.'<sup>2</sup> While under the above impression, the loving Shepherd of souls carefully withdrew

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Florentii*, ch. v. sec. 1, 2, 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* ch. iv. sec. 3; Ps. cxlvii. 3, and cxlv. 18, 19.

His sheep, dearly redeemed with the price of His own blood, from the midst of the snares, and gently led him to the fold of the holy assembly which he was about to rule.

For when the venerable master, Gerard the Great, preached the gospel throughout the diocese of Utrecht, many clerics and laymen went to hear the Word of God; and, abandoning the vanities of the world, sought by sorrow and repentance to gain possession of the heavenly kingdom; for the living voice of the preacher so much the more powerfully prevailed in the hearts of his hearers from his more perfectly surpassing others in the paths of virtue, since the holy conversation exhibited in operation gave effect to his discourses. He frequently preached at St. Mary's, Deventer, and Florentius was found among those present, diligently listening to what was spoken; and being wisely instructed from without by the light of heavenly words, he was soon enlightened within, and pricked to the heart. For the celebrated preacher was wont at times to direct his eyes towards those standing near, and to adapt his discourse to their condition, and for the advantage of his hearers would plead loud and long, with deep and persevering fervour, as when anxious fishermen spread out their nets more widely where they think that more fish have gathered together. So by Divine inspiration it came to pass that Florentius, who was adequately and gracefully endowed at an early age, willingly heard the voice of the Lord, and did not pass by with a deaf ear the sound of the heavenly pipe, but profitably applied it to himself. For he was one of those sheep of whom the Saviour declared, 'My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.'

Thus inspired by the Spirit of God, and thoroughly besprinkled with heavenly dew, Florentius suddenly withdrew the foot of vanity, which he had begun to plant on the journey of this world. He prudently weighed what would follow the fleeting gratifications of the flesh, even cruel death and endless sorrow. Therefore that he might not lose the flower-bearing country of the angels he resolved

to spurn from him the delusive honours of the world, and esteemed it best to follow the humble life of Christ.

That the reader may gather some of the spiritual instruction which Thomas à Kempis would convey, and gain further glimpses of that religious community with which he was connected all his life, the gradual origin of it, and the devout fervour of its early members, I shall continue to give the words of our author from time to time, rather than compress the narrative by giving only a brief account of what he tells us of Florentius. For let it be remembered that Thomas à Kempis had this man in his mind more than all others, after the Divine man Christ Jesus, when he wrote that book—which has been unequalled since the days of the Apostles for advancing the spiritual life—the ‘*De Imitatione Christi*.’ For it was from Florentius that he learnt more immediately, more vividly, and more really, how to follow Christ and become like Him, which so fitted him in after life for becoming a director of souls. And as we read what he tells us of Florentius, we shall learn the better how à Kempis became the spiritual man he was, endeavouring daily and hourly to be Christ-like, to live wholly, as much as mortal man can do, with Christ, and for Christ.

Desiring, therefore, to have more familiar intercourse with Gerard, and seeing that he had a great zeal for souls, Florentius delayed not to seek an interview, confided in his reverence, and told to him in order, as to the friend and trusted servant of God, that which inwardly moved him. He was joyfully welcomed, the bosom of charity was opened to him, the desired intercourse was afforded him, and a reason was accorded concerning whatsoever matters he desired to be informed upon. Thus brought together they sweetly discoursed of the things that pertain to salvation; and the hearts of both of them burned with celestial aspirations; all earthly things grew vile; and the good counsels concerning the Divine service were confirmed. Hereupon those are united in the love of the brotherhood, who, in the holy conversation they propose to themselves, earnestly desire a country in the Lord. And the manifold grace of God was so present with them, that they not only advanced their own salvation, but that of their neigh-



bours. For there were added to them, as a solace of fuller joy, and as an ornament of the house of our God, certain learned and eloquent men, who, powerfully inflamed by the gift of the Holy Spirit, chose firmly to adhere to the footsteps of Christ, and through the contempt of worldly things, and a brave warfare against vice, to pass to eternal good.<sup>1</sup>

And when the most sweet south wind of Divine love, continues à Kempis in another chapter, blew more frequently upon the little garden of the heart of Florentius, which was watered with his tears, he began to be very fruitful in great devotion, and to be incited with a pious emulation to draw others from the pollution of sin. He took great pains, therefore, to gain as spiritual Brothers those who formerly he used to delight to have as worldly companions, when engaged in the study of literature. For with the same fire with which he himself was inflamed, and with the same light with which he himself was illuminated by God, he hastened to instruct those who came to him with lucid words and examples. He therefore persuaded both clerics and laymen willingly to yield themselves up to the service of God, to shun corrupt intercourse, to seize every opportunity of hearing the word of God, to imitate the humility of Christ, and to look at the life of the Saints for an example thereof, seeing that by the virtue of continence and the precepts of the Lord, they might obtain eternal rewards.

Nor was the labour useless which he bestowed in winning souls, for abundant fruit grew therefrom. For many young men and young women, confiding in his salutary counsel, left their parents and friends, and began to walk humbly and piously ; and, abhorring a worldly life, to lead a social life in Christ after the Apostolic manner, and with cheerful hearts delighted to have a common table, and to eat sparingly. Finally he exhorted each one to advance onward in the steps of virtue, to pray oftener, to work at appointed times with their own hands, and to insist alike on sacred reading as on compunctious meditations ; by the which a greater ardour of devotion would be acquired, and a continual dread against the incitements of vice maintained, lest any one through slothfulness of heart should be led away captive by the Devil.<sup>2</sup>

In this spiritual labour for souls, however, Florentius met with much opposition ; and no little calumny and ill-

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Florentii*, cap. vii. sec. 1, 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* chap. viii. 1, 2.

will were raised up against him and his work. Thomas à Kempis thus speaks of it :—

Perceiving these endeavours after spiritual exercises, the old enemy of the human race was sorely fretted, and envying the happy beginning and pious actions of the devout Florentius, he omitted not to persecute him much. For fearing that the spoils of many souls would be taken from him by his example and the industry of his preaching, he urged on certain adversaries who, with coarse words and unusual derisions, attacked the simplicity of the just man, in order to pull him back from his good undertakings. But being a man of gentle soul and stoutly animated to endure opprobrium for Christ, he is neither affected by the violence of words nor the forgeries of detractions, so regarding all these as mere spiders' webs he steadily continued in the good work which he had begun. Thus he walked as one that was gentle among the perverse, patient among revilers, rendering to no man evil for evil, but either prayed with a tranquil heart and was silent, or curbed the lips of the rash with reasonable words. For fools impugned that of which they were ignorant, and with wanton feeling pronounced him to be mad whom they observed walking humbly and avoiding every frivolity.

But he like a flower<sup>1</sup> of the field continued to grow up with modest mien, clothed in a grey tunic, and cloaked in a long gown. And as a lily grows among the thorns, or being bruised, is fragrant, so Florentius being derided by scorners became more joyful, and by his patience gave back the sweeter and more excellent odour of his knowledge. For the Lord put on him the breast-plate of faith, and armed His soldier with the valour of constancy, so that the perversity of men could not overturn the state of his mind, which the grace of God strengthened within him. For he invariably endeavoured to bear reproach and terror for the name of Jesus, knowing that it is written : 'Blessed shall ye be when men shall speak evil of you, and cast out your name as evil on account of the Son of man.' He waited, therefore, sedulously on the Author of Life, Jesus the Son of God, Whom the Pharisees called a Samaritan and a seducer, Who warned His disciples that they must suffer many adversities from the worldly, as He Himself previously suffered more grievous things from the envious Jews. 'If,' said He, 'they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you, for the servant is not greater than his master.'<sup>2</sup> 'And if they

<sup>1</sup> There is here again an evident allusion to the name Florentius.

<sup>2</sup> St. John xv. 20.

have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more His servants?'<sup>1</sup>

Comforted therefore with these sacred words he neither cared for the ridicule of men, nor swerved from the true path of humility, which the truth taught, but by a contempt of the world and the abnegation of himself, he endeavoured to ascend to the highest virtues. For he preferred to be called an abject Lollard with his Brethren, and to be deemed mad by the worldly, rather than to be called a great lord and master. So that as much as in him lay he suppressed the honourable title of Master, and wished to be called only by the simple name Florentius, like others of his Brethren, some of whom were well informed, and born into the world of the richer sort. He desired moreover to have nothing that was costly in his dress, or that made him conspicuous; nor did he desire anything dainty for his food, and would admit no superfluity among his necessary articles: but used only the more simple and plain things which would hedge about humility, and would not offend the worldly, who are better taught by a lowly example than by subtle discourse. By thus following a life in common, and exhibiting a brotherly love to all, not thinking too wisely of himself, but by always agreeing with the humble, he was not feared as a rigid master, but loved as an amiable Father, because in him as in a very bright mirror, a becoming honourable bearing was externally apparent, and internally a heavenly purity.<sup>2</sup>

We have now some account given of Florentius being much consulted; his being promoted to the priesthood; and how he still persevered in the grace of humility. It will be preferable to let Thomas à Kempis tell the story in his own sweet and pious way.

But as honour deservedly follows a humble man, and just praise becomes a gentle man, those who before opposed the man of God, now restrained their tongues from unjust enmity, when they saw the constancy of his mind, and his resolution firmly fixed on the Lord. And being converted to piety, they began to extol the holiness of his life, to revere him on account of the modesty and discipline of his demeanour, and to respect the devout behaviour of the Brethren founded on the humility of Christ. And this indeed justly. For he over whom the grace of God had been poured, and whom He had made to blossom with many virtues, justly deserved to be loved and magnified by all.

<sup>1</sup> St. Matt. x. 25.

<sup>2</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Florentii*, ch. ix. 1, 2, 3.

As the fame of his goodness increased, many more Clerics and Laics frequented his house to hear the word of God ; and some of the Deputies and leading men of the city resorted to him for counsel, because the wisdom of God, and a faith greater in proportion to the virtue of his mind, were found to be in him. Wherefore in difficult and doubtful cases they securely intrusted their consciences to him, willingly listened to him, and, having heard him, did many good things pleasing to God.

The humble Master, therefore, full of charity, rejoiced concerning the fruit of souls, and the spiritual progress of the Brethren, and had great care for the wants of the poor clerics, venerating Christ our Lord in them. Moreover, the venerable Gerard considering his beloved disciple Florentius to be distinguished by the privilege of special devotion, and inspired by the counsel of the Holy Spirit, and being entreated by the prayers of many Brethren, determined to promote him to the rank of the Priesthood. But, protesting that he was unworthy of so great an honour, Florentius begged humbly to decline the burden. Nevertheless, overcome by the urgency of the Brethren, and not daring to oppose any longer the advice of his Master, obedience compelled him to assent. Being made a priest, therefore, he was not elated with human glory, but was found so much the more humble in every act and manner, as he was greater in dignity and rank. Concerning him Gerard gave the following testimony, 'I once caused a man to be ordained into the priesthood, and I hope that he was worthy. For the future, I shall take care not lightly to do the same thing, because I see few men suitable for it.'<sup>1</sup> But as Florentius himself was truly little and vile in his own sight, he thought nothing great of himself from his being ordained to be a priest, but in his own mind preferred even the inferior Brethren to himself, for of a simple cleric, not yet appointed to sacred things, he said, 'Would that I could offer for my cup to God in the judgment a feather of that cleric !'<sup>2</sup>

The meaning of this exclamation is somewhat obscure, but it seems to be this,—so poor and unworthy did he regard his own actions, that he looked upon them, in the sight of God, but as a feather or mite, in comparison of

<sup>1</sup> Several of the disciples of Gerard, some of whom I have yet to allude to, were priests, but they were so previous to their connection with Gerard. Florentius was the only person he persuaded to enter the ministry, so highly did he esteem the sacred office.

<sup>2</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Florentii*, ch. x. 1, 2.



that man's excellency, to whom he alludes. Florentius was at first made Canon of St. Peter's in Utrecht, but he resigned it shortly after he became acquainted with Gerard, and removed to Deventer that he might be near him, to be instructed by his example and doctrine, and afterwards became a vicar of St. Lebuin. He had no relish for ecclesiastical dignities, for on one occasion previous to his coming to Deventer he had said to one of his friends, 'I hope that I shall not die a canon, but serve God in a humbler state.'

And thus, continues Thomas à Kempis, it was done to the praise of God in his generation—since he, who was held in great reverence for his sanctity and abstinence, nevertheless, to the utmost of his power avoided the honour of men. He declined, therefore, to go out to the public resorts, and derived his only solace in remaining at home with his Brethren, knowing that he himself would make greater progress, and be an example of stability to others by pursuing such a course. Passing through the streets he proceeded quickly, not staying to make lengthened discourses to any one, but with few words, or only a nod of the head, satisfied the person passing by. For so little did he value the honours outwardly offered to him, that often he did not observe those that were tendered towards him, nor cared to investigate to whom they were directed. But proceeding to Church he was wont to pray in the mean time, or to meditate upon God, as the Holy Spirit inspired him.

On account of his great bodily weakness, and the frequent infirmities, which in his first fervour had arisen in consequence of his excessive abstinence, he was unable to attend the choir every day. Yet at the greater festivals and solemnities of the Saints he gladly attended vespers and the greater mass, as often as his health permitted. When he was Senior Vicar he always took his place on the left side of the choir in a lower stall, although the highest seat next to the canons was the proper place for him. Standing in the choir, he in no wise used to look around him with wandering eyes, but turned to the altar with all discipline; he stood with the most quiet reverence, devoutly intent upon God and himself, and as far as a sick man could, he used to sing the Psalms with a modulated voice and with unfaltering notes. So courteous was he, and of so reverend a countenance, that many of the youths and singers frequently looked at him, and wondered

at his devoutness, since nothing of levity appeared either in his words, or in the motion of his body. I, at that time, continues Thomas, was accustomed with other scholars to attend the choir, as had been enjoined upon me by Master John Boeme, who ruled his scholars and the choir with much strictness. As often as I saw my master, Florentius, standing in the choir—though he himself did not look round, yet fearing his presence on account of the reverence of his posture—I guarded myself from speaking anything lightly.

There were at that time in the Collegiate Church of Deventer many canons and learned vicars, men of unblameable life, earnest, and forward to perform the Divine service with becoming praise. These held the man of God, Florentius, in reverence, and worthy of honour, and anxiously restrained any improper lightness of conduct when he was present, so that the whole choir was made illustrious by the discipline of so great a priest.<sup>1</sup>

The beautiful simplicity and singleness of character portrayed in the life of Florentius by Thomas à Kempis is the very outcome and perfection of the interior life, and is as excellent as it is rare. He seems to have had the 'single eye' of which our Saviour speaks, the one aim and desire which seeks God and His Righteousness only, and whereby 'the whole body,' its actions, words, works, purposes, and general conduct—'is full of light,' and clear as the day; the whole character is simple and natural, open and manifest to all men, to do all to the glory of God. Men are far from 'the single eye' when they are full of themselves, and look but for the esteem, and love, and respect of men in what they do, wanting to be a centre for others to rally round and depend upon, and to make their own interests the centre round which everything they do, and what others do, should turn. Hence follows self-seeking in one way or another, a secret inward design to advance themselves, however much they may profess to seek God and His glory only. There is consequently more or less dissimulation of character, an unreal life, a want of straightforwardness, when this is the case; since there is a double motive in what is done—an eye to self as well as to God, a serving two masters, which

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Florentii*, chap. xi. 1, 2, 3.

never answers, which withers and blights devotion, makes a man inconstant, restless, jealous, intolerant, dissatisfied, untrustworthy, uncertain, and by his double aims and double dealings brings an ill-repute and contempt upon religion. But the sincere of heart, who give up caring for the world and self, as so clearly displayed in the character of Florentius, have God only in view, and the single desire to please Him. 'Eternal things have no attraction save in as much as they lead souls to Him, indifferent to what others say or think,' or to the behaviour of others towards them; their words and actions are perfectly uniform, upright, and manifest, as in God's sight.

Now, bearing in mind that Florentius lived and died several years before the '*De Imitatione Christi*' was written, and that à Kempis was in constant attendance upon him, and must have had frequent opportunities of knowing how he lived, that he loved and esteemed him above any other man, and looked to him as a true Father in God, since he had been his special director in the spiritual life, we might naturally expect to find in the '*Imitation*'—presuming that à Kempis was the author—that it particularly prescribed and held up to our admiration and example the striking character of such a man; this may be said of others whom à Kempis knew, but of none is it more applicable than to Florentius. We draw attention to this in passing, as it was not only likely to be so, but because there are many passages which seem directly to have in view the blessedness of such a life as he led. Here are a few which the reader would do well to have before him whilst listening to what à Kempis tells us further about Florentius.

We might enjoy much peace, if we would not busy ourselves with the words and deeds of other men, and in things in which we have no concern.

How is it possible for that man to dwell long in peace, who continually intermeddles in the affairs of another, who runneth abroad seeking occasions, and who never or but seldom comes to himself.

Blessed are the single-hearted ; for they shall enjoy much peace.

Why are some of the Saints so perfect and contemplative ? Because they laboured to mortify themselves wholly to earthly desires, and to abstract themselves from all worldly concerns, so that they might fix their hearts upon God, and be free for holy exercises.<sup>1</sup>

O how powerful is the pure love of Jesus, which is mixed with no self-interest—no self-love !

Are not all those to be called mercenary, who are for ever seeking after comforts ? Do they not show themselves to be rather lovers of themselves than of Christ, who are always thinking of their own profit and advantage ?

Where is the man that is willing to serve God for nought ? Where is the man to be found that is indeed poor in spirit, and thoroughly devoid of leaning on all created things ?<sup>2</sup>

The purer the eye of the intention is, with so much more constancy will a man pass through the various kinds of storms that assail him.

In many, however, the eye of a pure intention waxes dim, for it is quickly drawn aside after some pleasurable object that comes before it.

The eye of our intention must therefore be purified that it may be single and right, and may be directed unto Me (Christ) beyond all the various objects that intervene.<sup>3</sup>

But to proceed with the life of Florentius as given by Thomas à Kempis : speaking of *the simplicity of his dress*, he says :—

The pious Florentius, a lover of simplicity and of humility, knowing that the ornament of clothing did not make a priest, but rather humility of heart and modest behaviour, removed from himself all splendour of dress, and whatever pertained to the pomp of the world and human ostentation, in order to preserve the greater purity of his conscience. That the outward apparel might therefore correspond with the inward man, he did not, after he was made priest, seek for softer clothing as more suitable to him than others, but was content with ordinary and simple garments like the other Brethren. For having God always in view, he loved not changeable fashions and ornaments for the body, but kept his eye open to the virtues of the soul.

Moreover he avoided giving the least offence to the weak by

<sup>1</sup> Book i. ch. xi.

<sup>2</sup> Book ii. ch. xi.

<sup>3</sup> Book iii. ch. xxxiii.



any peculiarity in dress, or in any other thing which the necessity of nature required, choosing from the example of Christ that which was allied to humility, and held in little reputation by men. He did not therefore wear some things on Festivals, and other things on ordinary days, but only in the celebration of the mass he used to put on a better ornament on account of his reverence for the Sacrament, towards which he observed a measure of due honour. The 'Almutium,' or Amice, which he used to wear was old and faded enough, and in many places threadbare and as if it had been eaten by moths. And when I have seen him, writes à Kempis, going to the choir with such an 'Almutium,' I grieved that so good and honourable a priest should appear in public so simply and humbly. He had no fair sandals upon his feet, like other vicars in the Church, but he had made for himself common, poor clogs,<sup>1</sup> which were covered underneath with old leather, with which, without noise, he entered the choir. His tunic<sup>2</sup> and toga<sup>3</sup> were of grey cloth. His uncle had given him a new toga for friendship's sake, but he was unwilling to wear it, because it appeared too dignified, for he always preferred simple things to precious. His cowl or hood was black, or of a grey colour, and he wore it, as it was fitted for him, in such a manner that it protected the shoulders but left the neck bare. He had small sleeves drawn up with few fastenings, which from the wear and tear of age had sometimes been repaired with small pieces of new cloth in front. For this humble priest of God did not blush to wear an old tunic, patched by the tailor; and what is more, he and his Brethren were accustomed to strive in pious rivalry as to which were to have the meaner garments, and in this matter one strove to surpass the other.

On a particular occasion he was speaking devoutly respecting God to a certain secular cleric who stood near him, busied with his fair and curious sleeves, turning his hands hither and thither. To whom Florentius, kindly beholding him, said, 'See, Brother, my sleeves, what sort I wear, which neither occupy me nor disquiet me. To wear such long sleeves as you do would be irksome to me, and a burden.' Having heard these things, the cleric blushed a little and stood more quietly: and, accepting graciously what was said, went away edified, because he had received instruction for his own guidance with respect to the simplicity of his dress.

<sup>1</sup> *Calopodia*.

<sup>2</sup> A long garment like a cassock, worn by the clerics.

<sup>3</sup> A loose cloak or gown to throw over the tunic, usually worn out of doors.

Upon another occasion Florentius called his tailor to him, when about to make him a new tunic, and said, 'Do you know how to make an ugly tunic, Master?' Who answered, 'I know not whether I understand this well. But tell me, Master, what you wish to have?' Then the humble Florentius said to the tailor, 'Make of that cloth four parts, and so sew them together without folds, that I may be able to take off and put on the tunic easily, and then it will be good enough.' To this the tailor replied with much astonishment, 'O my beloved Master, how should this be? Wherefore should I wish to destroy good cloth? I would rather make it fit better.' Then the humble and gentle priest said, 'Why such anxiety about the outward apparel? Make it, for the love of God, in the plainest manner you can, for so it will be the more pleasing to me; for it becomes me to have simple things for the edification of others.' 'O most noble priest of Christ,' adds à Kempis with affectionate reverence, 'always inclined to a lowly state: he cut off the mere elegance of things that he might please God the more!'<sup>1</sup>

A kind of imputation has been cast upon the teaching of the 'De Imitatione Christi' to this effect, that it inculcates but a selfish religion, because it deals chiefly with the spiritual elevation of the individual soul. This idea has probably arisen from confusing the manner of life which the author and those associated with him led, with that of the monks, as usually represented, of those days. But this is a mistake, and we have shown elsewhere how groundless this imputation is; for when rightly understood, the advancement of the soul towards perfection leads rather to the subjection and abasement of self, and to a greater manifestation of real love and kindness to our neighbours, flowing out of our greater love for God, Who becomes the centre, rest, strength, and life of the soul. That the spiritual teaching and example among the Brothers of Common Life was not to wrap the soul up in its own interests to the neglect of others about them, but was such as rather to induce them to think of, to labour, and to care for others, and to strive for their everlasting welfare, is especially apparent in many ways; and here it is abundantly set forth

<sup>1</sup> *Vita Florentii*, chap. xii. 1, 2, 3, 4.

in the example of Florentius, which all the Brethren so much admired and endeavoured to copy. We give, therefore, as an instance of this what Thomas à Kempis tells us, respecting *the humble service which Florentius exercised towards the Brethren*, labouring with his own hands for the common good ; and *his many acts of compassion towards the poor, the sick, and the stranger*. It is instructive to observe how à Kempis introduces and handles this portion of the biography.

Christ, he says, the Light of the world, came into the world to enlighten the minds of the Faithful, preaching the words of heavenly life ; and by the example of His humility, which He left to be followed by all the Faithful throughout the world, He chiefly inflamed the torpid hearts of sinners to the love of His Name. For Christ so exhibited Himself in the midst of His disciples as one of themselves, manifesting a ministry of love, and not exercising a sovereignty of power ; so that whosoever should imitate Him, would also be accounted worthy to be honoured by him, and to be appointed over all good things in the kingdom of heaven. ‘I am,’ said He, ‘in the midst of you as one who ministers.’ And again, ‘The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life for many.’ And this doctrine of holy service, the humble servant of Christ, Florentius, with his Brethren studied to observe, persuading all his adherents, of whatever age they were, to serve one another for love, to bear one another’s burdens, not to abhor any menial work, but cheerfully to engage in humble services, embracing that rather which contained less of honour and more of trouble and hardship.

Thus this holy custom and approved virtue increased among them ; and like any one of the Brothers, Florentius devoted himself during his week to service in the kitchen, and would there help with all humility, or promptly and cheerfully fulfilled whatever things were enjoined him by the cook. For all were ardent to discharge the more servile operations ; and to labour for the Kingdom of God was thought a delightful rest. The good Father and sweet master, Florentius, wishing to afford a good example to his inferiors, held himself ever ready to take his turn in the kitchen. To whom a certain neighbour of his said : ‘Why, good master, do you occupy yourself in the kitchen? Have you no one who can do that for you? Would it not be

better that you should go to church, and that another should cook for you?' To which Florentius replied : 'Ought I not rather to aim at having the prayers of all the others, than only my own? For whilst I am in the kitchen all the others are engaged in praying for me. I hope, therefore, to derive greater benefit from the prayers of others who are in the church, than if I prayed alone.' Thus by his words, and by his example as well, he edified all ; not seeking what would be most pleasant to himself, but what was useful and exemplary to others. Whenever he used to eat with the Brethren, he, with his own hands, placed the first dish before them ; and grieved very much at this that, infirmity preventing him, he was not able to be daily present at the meals of the Brethren. And for the above reason he used to eat alone with his cook in the kitchen, having a little table soberly prepared, because the weakness of his stomach did not permit him to take solid food. I, though unworthy, adds à Kempis, being invited by him, have often prepared his table, and have brought the modicum which he asked for from the pantry, and rejoicing, I have ministered unto him with much cheerfulness.<sup>1</sup>

In showing *how diligently Florentius employed his time*, and how he would seek out opportunities for benefiting the Brethren, à Kempis makes some suitable reflections which it would be a pity to overlook, as they inculcate the faithful use of time as most consistent with advanced piety.

O first in morals, he says, and worthy to be remembered by all the devout, the most pious Florentius was never willingly found idle, but endeavoured to spend precious time fruitfully, taking care by every means not to eat his bread for nought and without labour, though he was beneficed. What he learned and received from his venerable Master, Gerard, he diligently observed ; whose opinion it was, that no one should be received into the Congregation unless, according to the dictates of St. Paul, he would labour with his own hands. For sanctified labour is most useful for all spiritual progress. By it lasciviousness of the flesh may be subdued ; and the mind, freed from rambling thoughts, may be more quickly curbed. By this holy activity hurtful ease is removed, and frivolous conversation arising from idleness is more easily restrained. And since the opportunity for light talking is taken away, labour will progress in the hand, and he who shall have been a faithful labourer will always be the

<sup>1</sup> *Vita Florentii*, chap. xiii. 1, 2.



richer in good things. By this also the necessities of the Brethren may be wisely provided for, and the miseries of the poor more plentifully succoured. For that charity is more pleasing to God, and shines more brightly, which proceeds from the sweat of the brow, and being sought for in honest labour, refreshes the indigent. Therefore, the art of writing books, which is more suitable to clerics and can be more quietly practised, was quickly learned by the Brethren of his house, and generally introduced for the preservation of the common good. The venerable Father Florentius himself, that he might not bear the empty name of Rector, but by the exhibition of labour commend the priestly office, gave a bright example to the writers, by polishing the parchments, and by ruling and arranging the four-fold sheets (quaterniones). Though he knew less how to write well than others, still in preparing the necessary things, he assisted as many as possible with his own hands—consecrated with holy oil.

It is rather amusing, observes a writer commenting upon the above passage, to see the scant measure of praise which Thomas à Kempis, the first copyist of his time, awards him. But Florentius by his example teaches us to do what we can in the way of duty, though we may be less proficient than others, and not to cease from labour because we cannot do so well as others. But, proceeds Thomas :—

Sometimes when it was necessary, and leisure time afforded, he would, with a companion he had selected, carefully read and correct the books already written, or would compile from the Holy Scriptures some notable devotions for the consolation of the Brethren, and for their exercises in private. For he was greatly pleased and delighted when he had done something useful during the day for the common good, knowing that this would be most pleasing to God. But besides the multitude of clerics flocking to him, when the fame of his goodness more widely resounded, he was sought after by many strangers, and by religious and learned men. Therefore, for the health of souls it behoved him to apply himself to higher matters, and frequently to abstain from personal business and private studies, and to prefer spiritual gains to temporal advantages.

So many sometimes, writes Thomas, stood before his chamber door for the sake of consulting him—desiring to speak to him, or to confess their secrets to him as to a holy man—that scarcely a

passage was left to him for going out, scarcely time for saying the 'Hours,' and fitly attending to the requisite necessities of the body. Yet he left no one disconsolate, but either extricated the incontinent man, or granted to the petitioner another opportunity of free access to himself, according to his wish. It often happened when he began to read his 'Hours,' so many interrupted him one after another, that he was unable to finish the Psalm which he had begun. Lest through weariness he should cease to open the door to one who knocked he would say to himself: 'Still once more, for the sake of God.' And this he often repeated and long continued, overcoming from brotherly love the disturbance and want of quietude by patience.<sup>1</sup>

Imbued with the spirit of his heavenly Master, Who went about doing good, Florentius was indefatigable in good works, and *his attention to the poor and afflicted* is especially to be noticed. Thomas à Kempis thus further speaks of his abounding charity.

Among other works of piety, the virtue of compassion conspicuously flourished and increased in the heart of the pious Father, which was manifested and fulfilled in the frequent bestowal of alms to the poor and to strangers. Whence it may be deservedly said of him: 'He hath dispersed abroad, he hath given to the poor, his righteousness remaineth for ever.'<sup>2</sup> For Florentius was the most loving father to the poor, the very sweet consoler of the afflicted, and the most compassionate visitor of the sick. Full of the Spirit of God he possessed, together with the milk of pity, the wine of zeal and fervour, nourishing the infirm with the oil of compassion; and though holding their passions and vices in great abhorrence, he exercised both great judgment and discretion in his time.

Often did he send food from his own table to the needy and feeble; and any kind of sustenance sent in love to himself, he imparted with alacrity to others more in need. He also kept the names of the poor in writing, the care of whom he enjoined upon one or two of the Brethren, that they might procure for them becoming hospitality, or help towards bearing their expenses. There were at that time certain honourable God-fearing men, living in Deventer, who exhibited a good conversation according to the counsels of Florentius; also certain rich and devout matrons, given to deeds of compassion, who, diligently frequenting the Church of God and honouring His priests, freely bestowed at the

<sup>1</sup> *Vita Florentii*, chap. xiv. 1, 2, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ps. cxii. 9.

request and urgency of Master Florentius much beneficence upon the poor clerics who served God. So pious and so beloved by all was this humble vicar of Christ, that if he asked anything for any poor man, he quickly obtained his request. He made himself as affable to the friendless and to strangers, as if they were friends and kinsmen of his own, asking whence they came, what were their names, and begging that they would sometimes come and visit him.

This distinguished lover of chastity did not withhold his benevolence from little children and young people, striving to preserve their natural innocence and purity : but with pious words instructed them to love Jesus and Mary, persuading them to continue innocent, that being made like unto the angels of God, they might sing in heaven the song of the virgins. To the sad and tempted, he showed himself cheerful and full of comfort ; so that if any one had been hurt, or was troubled, and having come to see him, and spoken a little with him, he was soon pacified and consoled, and returned to his own affairs with joy. This, remarks Thomas, I have very often experienced in my own case, and noticed in my companions, the Devotees, who were instructed by his counsel, and taught in the school of Christ with the best lessons. Nor did he even shun the leprous, or those disfigured by any deformity of body, but took care to demean himself with greater clemency to such abject persons, knowing that this pleased the Creator the more, and would be more glorious for himself, because he did not regard the vileness of the person, but the ties of nature, and the image of God in man.

I have seen a one-eyed man, Thomas writes, and a lame man converted by him, and afterwards made approved men. I have also known a certain leprous man abiding outside the walls of the city, allowed to approach the man of God, for the sake of devotion, and to speak familiarly with him ; and many persons seeing this very thing, wondered how he could sit so humbly beside the leprous man. To whom also he directed drink to be given, and special compassion to be bestowed, whom, after more words of holy consolation, he dismissed to his own house, to return thankfully with his companion.<sup>1</sup>

As Thomas à Kempis has many other matters of interest to relate respecting Father Florentius, and as the present chapter has already been extended to a considerable length, further particulars will be reserved to the following chapter.

<sup>1</sup> *Vita Florentii*, chap. xv. 1, 2, 3, 4.

## CHAPTER IX.

The life of Florentius by à Kempis continued—Further instances of his kind services to the poor, and especially to the afflicted—The severe discipline he exercised over himself—Often brought nigh unto death—The Vision of Angels on one of these occasions—The house of Florentius brightened by the exercise of Christian virtues—His patience, courtesy, and affection towards all men—His exhortations respecting spiritual perfection—His collations and the influence of his discourses—His understanding in the Scriptures—The discreet use of his words in talking with those in the world—The Three Temptations which he said beset Devotees—His sending forth pious Brethren to divers places for the restoration of the Religious Life—The success of these missions—Friends who aided the work—His death and interment—A selection of his choice sayings.

IN continuing the account which Thomas à Kempis gives us of the life of Florentius, it must be borne in mind that he represents him to us in all the fervour of his devoted admiration and loving affection for him. And though he draws in glowing terms a most lovely and exalted picture of his sanctified life, it was not to be wondered at when we consider the contrast which he exhibited to others who professed a religious life, how much he influenced others for good, and how conscious they were of the deep sincerity of his religion, and of his unwearied endeavour to promote a revival of true Christianity. Even making some allowance for the enthusiasm of an attached disciple, he was one that seemed to the eye of à Kempis to be as free from earthly blemish as mortal man could be, a true follower of the Lamb of God. He had seen many excellent and pious men, but there were none who surpassed him, or who was so peculiarly Christ-like in all respects, or was so replete with Christian graces as his beloved Father in Christ; and as long as ever he lived the recollection of him and the odour



of his sanctity were as sweet as they were refreshing to his soul. Most anxious was he that all the Faithful in Christ in other places and in future generations should know and learn something about him, and be edified by the records which he gives of his exemplary life.

Proceeding to give further particulars of his kind services to the poor and afflicted, and pointing out a variety of ways in which he manifested a real interest in their welfare, à Kempis says :—

But since, according to the teaching of Divine Scripture, ‘God loveth a cheerful giver,’ it pleases me to relate something more concerning the remarkable compassion of this most clement Father to the poor, the ulcerous, and deformed, who had not the solace of friends. This most pitiful Father of the poor, then, daily received alms for the pious use of the mendicants, and every year, on the Feast of the blessed Pope Gregory, was accustomed to invite twelve poor scholars to dine with him, in honour of St. Gregory, because he had read that the blessed Gregory had twelve poor persons every day. And I, by his authority, have brought to his house at the hour of dinner certain poor men mentioned to me by name. And these being refreshed with food and drink returned to their places with cheerful hearts, praising God for the kindness received, and giving great thanks to their liberal host, Florentius, and his Brethren. Then was plainly fulfilled what is said by the Psalmist, and is sung by many religious persons before the benediction of the table : ‘The poor shall eat and be satisfied, and they that seek the Lord shall praise Him.’<sup>1</sup>

Also in the month of May, when the wild herbs are especially valuable for medicaments, the pious Father was not forgetful of his poor. Knowing that many were feeble, afflicted with scurvy, and ulcerous, he caused them to come to his house on an appointed day at a certain hour for medicines and for a bath to be taken in warm water with fragrant herbs. And for whom he prepared, when well bathed and washed, a little bed very clean, for thoroughly clearing away their perspiration. A little cup of something being given to invigorate them, and a word of consolation, they went back with great joy to their hospices, mutually conferring among themselves, and saying, ‘How good is that man

<sup>1</sup> Ps. xxii. 26.

Florentius, and how good are those Brethren dwelling with him, who freely give us such things for God's sake !'

On a certain occasion during Lent (*Quadragesima*), at a time when things were somewhat dear, and the poor mendicants were oppressed with want, many fled for solace to the compassionate Father Florentius, hoping to find some help, since no one was accustomed to depart from him empty, no one unconsolated. In such a crisis as this, therefore, this father of compassion, distressed by their hunger, grieved much ; and having taken counsel with his Brethren, he sought out the best means for relieving the devout poor, who were so straitened in their circumstances that they had neither money in their purses nor bread in their satchels. Then the Brethren were unanimously incited to succour the crowds of poor, especially in so sacred a season as '*Quadragesima*,' when the days of penitence are observed, and larger tributes of pity ought to flow to the poor, demanding bread with many prayers for God's sake, as it is read in *Isaiah* : 'Break thy bread to the hungry, and take the poor and the wanderers to thy house. When thou shalt see him naked that thou cover him, and shalt not despise thine own flesh.'<sup>1</sup> They therefore firmly resolved to deprive themselves of something, and to contribute more plentifully to the poor ; moreover, they determined to add one hour beyond the accustomed time of their labour, daily, throughout the whole of '*Quadragesima*,' for the poor ; and whatever they might gain in that hour by writing, to deliver this, when collected together, to an overseer of the poor, that he might afterwards buy the necessary food and administer it faithfully to the needy. The same was done in other houses, where certain Brothers, writers, and officials, sacrificed the emoluments of their labours in alms to God, willingly depriving themselves, and happily recruiting the poor.

And who shall worthily set forth all the compassion of this most propitious father to the poor and to strangers, but chiefly towards the simple and devout servants of Christ ?

Though all be silent, writes à Kempis, yet will I not hold my tongue, but will for ever sing of the benevolence of Florentius, because with indisputable fidelity, I have myself, whilst living with him, proved by experience for a period of seven years the greatness of his goodness. Truly with the blessed *Job*, he was 'a foot to the lame, an eye to the blind, a hand to the needy, a staff to the weak, a solace to the fallen, a garment to the ill-clad.'<sup>2</sup> One poor person rejoiced for the alms given him, another for the coat

<sup>1</sup> *Is.* lviii. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Job* xxix. 15, 16.

prepared for him ; one carried away a cloak, another a hooded-cape, another received shoes, another stockings, another a girdle and socks. Another rejoiced that he had obtained books, another pens, ink, and paper. Each joyful for their particular gifts, confessed that they had obtained from Florentius not only an emolument for the body, but also a remedy for the soul. The frail tongue is not able fully to express his virtues and deeds of charity because his behaviour and that of his Brethren surpass human judgment. Truly I fear not to say, concerning them, what is written of Apostolic men : ' Their good works remain with their posterity, and all the Church of the saints shall tell of their alms.'<sup>1</sup>

Thomas à Kempis having described the good esteem in which Florentius was held by the laity as well as the religious of all degrees, and given several instances of his humility and his charity, now informs us of the severity of his early abstinence and consequent sickness and feebleness of body. It is much to be deplored that good men in their excessive zeal to keep under the body are sometimes carried to extreme lengths, so that they weaken themselves, and are incapacitated for doing the work God has given them to do for Him. Those who are Christ's will mortify the flesh with the affections and lusts ; but yet it must be tempered with discretion and prudence, else they destroy one of God's best blessings, that of health, for which every good man should daily give God thanks. The Church's rule in this matter is ' to use such abstinence, that our flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may ever obey His godly motions in righteousness and true holiness to God's honour and glory.'

There are many who fare sumptuously every day, and have always a full table to go to who would find a great advantage from occasional abstinence and fasting ; moreover, since we have the implied injunction of our Lord, as well as His example, it ought in some measure to be generally observed ; but the account which Thomas à Kempis gives us of Florentius shows how necessary it is that this severe exercise be kept within due bounds, and cannot be alike observed by all. For though the latter mani-

<sup>1</sup> Eccl. xxxi. 11.

fested the thorough earnestness of his religion by the severe subjugation of the flesh, yet one cannot but feel that, had he but practised this exercise in moderation, his life might in all probability have been prolonged, to the furtherance of true religion, the glory of God, and the salvation of souls. No one, therefore, must be more unmerciful to his own body than to the beast that carries him or is employed in his service. The latter he would subject and control for use, but he would not so starve or disable the animal as to unfit it for doing its proper work in after life. He would keep up its natural strength while he still curbed it. And such, in like manner, is the care that should be taken in all the discipline we undertake for the subjugation of our corrupt nature. It is probable that this view of the question was taken by à Kempis himself. His language seems to imply it. It certainly was shared by the leaders of the Brotherhood afterwards, as we shall show, who put a restraint upon too extreme an observance of fasting, and would only allow those to practise it who were strong enough to endure it, lest it should become hurtful to their health. But we must now hear the account given by our author of *the austerities practised* by this earnest man.

The ardent and devout servant of God, Florentius, at the outset of his career, in order to subdue the lust of the flesh, too rigidly chastised his body with fasts and vigils, not sufficiently heeding the debility of his constitution ; but in the ardour of his spirit so attacked the domestic enemy, that by the weight of his rigour he destroyed a citizen hitherto necessary and faithful to him ; because he abstained not only from things unlawful and superfluous, but deprived himself of many actual necessities, so that for the most part he had lost the desire of eating, and had no taste for discerning food. Whence it once happened that in the absence of the cook he entered the cellar, and drank oil from a certain vessel instead of beer ; nor was he able to tell the difference, until the cook inquired from which vessel he had drunk, and then knew that he had made a mistake. At another time in a certain monastery a small quantity of wine was offered to him to drink for the sake of his infirmity, and from the reverence which the Brethren had towards him. And when he had tasted a little he said to a by-stander : ‘ How sharp and bitter you have made



your beer.' And the Brothers wondered that he distinguished not wine from another liquor. He ate, therefore, oftener as if without taste, and rather from necessity of nature, than for the appetite of the palate or the sweetness of any food.

I went sometimes to visit him in his room, writes à Kempis, where he used to sit feebly on his little couch, and I have greeted him kindly, grieving much on account of his infirmity. And Brother James of Viana, who then waited on him, would bring him a certain sort of food (*comformativis*), saying : 'This is a good kind of food ; taste a little. Does it not taste very well ?' Then he would answer in my hearing : 'A crust of bread would taste better to you, than that does to me.' Although he was so completely debilitated, and compassed with so many infirmities of the body, yet did he not cease from the work of God and the loving gain of souls ; but when he could bear men to approach him, he gave the admonitions of salvation with renewed earnestness to those seeking for it, and so much the more sweet was it, the more they knew that he was beloved of God, and like precious gold was tried in the fire by various infirmities.

The account then goes on to show how he bore his affliction ; how many prayers were offered up for him by the Devotees for his recovery, and how often God heard their prayers. Thus we read :—

When, therefore, he suffered frequent pains of body, he earnestly endeavoured to return thanks to God, because 'the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the future glory of God that is to be acquired.' Therefore he patiently bore the rod of the Lord which was laid upon him, regarding it as a medicine for the soul, as a sign of love, according to that apostolic saying, 'Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth.' But the gracious Lord, wishing to show how much the proved virtue of his sons pleased Him, and how greatly the prayers of the devout prevailed, often took pity upon his beloved priest, in his extreme necessity, when his recovery by human means seemed to be despaired of by the doctors. Nevertheless, he placed his whole trust in the Lord, who raiseth up in safety those who mourn. Therefore as often as any grievous infirmity attacked him, word was sent to the neighbouring congregations of Brothers—clerics and sisters—that they should all urgently pray for him every day, that God would yet spare him, by lengthening his life for the salvation of many, lest the devout should have sorrow upon sor-

row, if they should be deprived of so loving a Father, and so necessary a Ruler.

I was sometimes, says à Kempis, the messenger to communicate this matter, saying to the Sisters : 'Pray for Master Florentius, because he is seriously ill.' And behold ! the merciful Lord, Who despises not the prayers of the poor, but gladly listens to the supplications of the humble, restored health to His dear and faithful servant, that he might make known His power to the sons of men.<sup>1</sup>

A Kempis then alludes to the visits of Everard Eza, curé of Almelo, 'a great master in medicine,' of whose conversion by Gerard, and his subsequent devout and beneficent career, his love for the Brotherhood, and other followers of Christ, as well as his deep regard for Florentius, mention has been already made. The good physician was accustomed to come frequently to see Florentius, his intimate friend, during his periods of sickness, and tried various remedies for his recovery, and often with great success ; for he many times did him good, Thomas tells us, and oftentimes cheered and consoled the sorrows of the Brethren, who loved him very much, and always gladly welcomed him, by the confidence he entertained of expected health. But he was wont to say to the attendant that 'he had more confidence in God than in the art of medicine, because it was beyond human power that this man could live so long with such a debilitated body ; and unless a special grace preserved him, and the prayers of many were made for him, he would quickly die, or would even have been dead long ago. It is a good thing, therefore, to pray faithfully for him, because his health specially rests upon the Divine favour.'

Thomas à Kempis then relates a singular vision which Florentius had during one of these seasons of serious illness. There is always something mysterious in such visions, something that cannot be accounted for, something that cannot be explained, cannot be fathomed. Instances of such experiences have been too well authenticated, or

<sup>1</sup> See Psalm cxlv.

vouched for by persons of approved veracity, that it seems impossible to doubt the truth of some of them. And the only conclusion that we can come to is that which poets have frequently alluded to, that there are more things in heaven and earth than men dream of ; that there is another world around us, and in which we even live, but which we cannot see with our mortal eyes, or have any perception of by our natural faculties, and this is what the Bible plainly and repeatedly reveals to us. But nevertheless it is only rarely, often at times when the body is weakened, and verging on the borders of the other world, that the curtain which hides the invisible from mortal view is momentarily lifted, and a glimpse is given of things beyond, which our natural faculties cannot reach. One of our poets alludes to this, when he says :—

The soul's dark cottage, battered and decayed,  
Lets in new light through chinks that time has made :  
Stronger by weakness, wiser men become,  
As they draw nearer their eternal home,  
Leaving the old, both worlds at once they view,  
And stand upon the threshold of the new.

The account given by Thomas of what happened to Florentius when he was once apparently nearing death is thus for the most part recorded :—

Among other times of the year when he was wont to be more seriously and frequently ill was during Lent, on account of the Lenten food not being sufficiently suitable and nutritious. For though he was then more feeble in body, yet did he offer himself with a more cheerful mind to the undertaking of the fast. Once did he grow so feeble through total fasting—his stomach being already too much weakened—that it was scarcely expected that he would live until Easter. But the devout Brethren did not cease to cry out in their prayers to the Lord for him : for again with multiplied intercessions they entreated the favour of the Lord, which they had already experienced. For when every human help was failing, they the more resorted to the very powerful solace of God.

When, therefore, the fast had been completed, and the glorious Feast of the Resurrection of the Lord had begun, and the chosen man of God, Florentius, was resting quietly on his little

bed, overcome with sweet sleep, behold in that most sacred paschal night he was deservedly consoled and comforted by an angelic vision. For he saw two angels appear to him, of whom one stood at the right hand of the bed, and the other at the left. The one elevated his hand on high, waving it over the head of the sleeper, as if he were going to strike with a sword; but the other immediately withheld the blow of the striker, and prevented him, saying, 'Do not strike, for he shall yet live, and shall not die.' Being astonished at this vision from Heaven, and as if resuscitated from death to life, he awoke wonderfully comforted in the Lord, and calling to his servant, who was sleeping not far off in the room, he said to him confidently, 'Arise and prepare something, that I may eat to-day. I feel that I am better, and we must feast together in the Lord.' Then full of great joy, the attendant hastened to prepare what was commanded. And all who heard wondered and rejoiced, that he who just before they feared would die, had begun so quickly to be convalescent.<sup>1</sup> This vision he afterwards made known to his uncle, the Canon of St. Mary's in Utrecht, who most cordially loved him; not, however, mentioning that the vision had occurred to himself; but that it was revealed respecting him to some one who was still living. On hearing which his uncle greatly and heartily congratulated him, and blessed God, because He had sent His angel and restored him to health, from the jaws of death. The most celebrated Florentius lived many years after this, to the comfort of all the devout—clerics as well as laics—who came to him from various places and countries for the remedies of their souls; and to whom the man of the Lord, both by word and example, was pre-eminent in the great leadership of a holy conversation, with all the Brethren assembled in the House, to the praise of the omnipotent God.<sup>2</sup>

There is another vision or singular dream mentioned by Thomas à Kempis shortly after this, which a young member of the house had, and which is here related because it occurs in the life of Florentius, and refers to the community over which he presided. There is a preface to it

<sup>1</sup> The author of the *Imitatio* had evidently in his mind such a circumstance as this, with others of a like nature, when addressing God he says:—'Wherefore I here offer and present unto Thee the rejoicings of all devout hearts, their ardent affections, the raptures of their minds and *supernatural illuminations and heavenly visions*,' &c.—Book iv. ch. xvii.

<sup>2</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Florentii*, chap. xix. 1, 2, 3.



of an eulogium on the Institution where he himself received so much good. It is as follows, given almost entirely in the simple and familiar style of conveying instruction which à Kempis adopts.

The congregation of Brothers in the house of the Reverend Father Florentius, so very pleasing and acceptable to God, being gathered together for the glory of God, shone forth with great virtues, and stood adorned with actions of sublime merit. There humility, the chief of all virtues, was cultivated from the greatest to the least, making of an earthly home a paradise, transforming mortal men into celestial pearls, as living stones to be glorified in the temple of God. There, obedience, the mother of virtues, and the lamp of discretion, flourished under so great a discipline, that it was the highest wisdom to obey without delay, and was accounted a fearful wickedness to neglect the advice or the least word of a Senior. There, love to God and one's neighbour burned so brightly, inwardly and outwardly, that the hard hearts of sinners, having heard their holy discourses, were dissolved in tears ; and those who came cold were inflamed by the heat of the word, and departed joyfully, taking care not to sin for the future. There, the armour of spiritual warfare glittered valiantly against every vice, and old men and young men learnt to contend bravely against Satan, their own flesh, and the deceitfulness of the world. There, the memory of the old Fathers, and the glowing conversation of the Egyptian monks,<sup>1</sup> which lay in the earth as if half-

<sup>1</sup> Let the reader peruse the book called *The Hermits*, written by the Rev. Charles Kingsley, especially the life of St. Antony, and that of St. Paul, the first hermit. Kingsley's words sound very like a description of 'the Brothers of Common Life,' for he says, 'It was discovered about the end of the fourth century, that the mountains and deserts of Egypt were full of Christian men who had fled out of the dying world, in the hope of attaining everlasting life. Wonderful things were told of their courage, their abstinence, their miracles, and of their virtues also ; of their purity, their humility, their helpfulness and charity to each other and to all. They called each other, it was said, Brothers ; and they lived up to that sacred name, forgotten, if ever known, by the rest of the Roman empire. Like the Apostolic Christians in the first fervour of their conversion, they had all things in common ; they lived at peace with each other, under a mild and charitable rule ; and kept literally those commands of Christ which all the rest of the world explained away to nothing.

'The news spread. It chimed in with all that was best, as well as with much that was questionable, in the public mind. That men could be brothers, that they could live without the tawdry luxury, the tasteless and often brutal amusements, the low sensuality, the base intrigue, the bloody warfare, which was the accepted lot of the many ; that they could find time to look steadfastly at heaven and hell as awful realities, which must be faced some day, which

dead, returned to life and raised the condition of the clerics to the model of highest perfection according to the primitive order of the Church. There, was heard the devout exhortation of spiritual training; and amid daily meditations, the sacred and painful passion of our Lord Jesus Christ was very frequently and lovingly commemorated and eaten; from the devout remembrance of which the salvation of the soul is known to proceed, and is availing to heal the deadly bite of the serpent, to soothe the suffering mind, and to lift up the torpid soul from earthly to heavenly things by the imitation of the Cross.

When, therefore, the ardour of great devotion for divine blessing was renewed, and was kindled in the hearts of many, and that holy Congregation, instructed by the example of the Reverend Father Florentius to the perfect contempt of the world, was advancing always to something better, the loving God, who bestows His blessing and favour on the humble, ceased not to refresh with holy consolations and internal joys those who faithfully served Him. And to offer something from many instances, I will briefly narrate one vision to them, which God the Knower of all secrets deigned to manifest over this house blessed with heavenly unction.

A certain devout disciple of those recently established by Florentius was one night greatly terrified by an unwonted vision, at which he well-nigh expired, but in the end was made joyful by the wondrous power of God. When he was resting in his place, behold! a very strong wind from the north arose, and a most dreadful tempest struck the whole earth, as if the terrible day of the last judgment for all flesh was now nigh at hand. Frightened by the horrible tempest the young man began to think whither he might fly, and where he might turn from the presence of the terrors of the Lord. Taken in this straight, he looked again towards heaven, and behold! the sign of the cross appeared clearly in the air, representing the Author of human salvation. Seeing, therefore, this holy image of the Crucified, with expanded hands pierced with nails hanging in the air, by whose rays the world was illuminated, presently that storm ceased. And the cross proceeded until it stood over the house of Florentius, in which were dwelling holy servants of the cross, and the true de-  
had best be faced at once; this, just as much as curiosity about their alleged miracles, and the selfish longing to rival them in superhuman powers, led many of the most virtuous and most learned of the time to visit them, and ascertain the truth . . . In Rome itself the news produced an effect which, to the thoughtful mind, is altogether tragical in its nobleness.'—Introduction, pp. 9, 12.

spisers of the world. At whose arrival and presence the entire house, as if going to meet the Saviour, was lifted up from its foundation into the air above the earth, and, reverently inclining on one side toward the cross, returned to its foundation. But the image of the cross proceeded and stood on a wall near the entrance of the house, through which the brethren daily passed. Having seen these things, the youth with expanded hands began to pray towards the cross, and to beg for protection from the wrath of the terrible judgment. He was immediately taken up from his place, and brought within the door of the house of Florentius, as into a place of security beneath the wings of the Crucified. Then being exhilarated, and as though saved from every strait, he was stirred with ineffable joy. And greatly wondering, he returned thanks to God, who had vouchsafed to him the honour to reveal such things to these devout Brothers, to whom thenceforward he studied to adhere, and ever to venerate the life hid with Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Without making any remarks upon the nature and peculiarity of this vision or dream, it is sufficient to point out the impression which it left upon the minds of the Brethren with regard to the House or Community where they lived. It was a parable to them of the safety and blessedness of the condition in which they then dwelt. And it was something more to them: it was a testimony, a happy assurance that if they would persevere in that holy, self-denying course of life which they had chosen, looking to Christ as their Saviour, and following in His blessed steps whilst they lived, they never need to fear the coming of

That day of wrath, that dreadful day,  
When heaven and earth shall pass away.

Thomas à Kempis proceeds to give us some details of *the patience, the courteousness, and affection* which Florentius exhibited towards all. One anecdote which he relates, illustrative of his unselfishness, which lies at the bottom of all true goodness of souls, is this:—

A certain Councillor, emboldened by worldly craft, did not fear to molest the man of God, Florentius, but impudently endeavoured to deprive him of his Benefice, thinking, perchance, that

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Florentii*, chap. xxi.

no one would oppose him, or would reply in behalf of the Vicar of Christ, because he seemed so devout and meek under injuries. Being summoned therefore to the trial that he might reply to the adversary concerning the complaints urged against him, Florentius neither used long arguments nor any elaborate discourse, but in a brief and humble answer, thus spake, 'If you have better law than I have, hold to it, in the name of God.' At this the bystanders wondered, and those present were edified by the words he had spoken. But one of the Canons being zealous for the man of God, not enduring that a just and innocent man should be oppressed, said to him : 'Why do you speak thus, O beloved Florentius? Do you not care more than this for your prebend? Indeed the man shall not have what he seeks, but we will plead for you, that you may keep what, by good right, you possess.' Upon hearing these words the adversary was silent and withdrew, having got nothing. They knew well, from the greatest to the least, that the faithful and devout Florentius was a worthy priest of Christ, by whose life and doctrine many were drawn to a contempt of the world. For from among the great and wise of the earth, he made many humble and faithful Brethren, who, being fully instructed, he prepared for a religious state, and for the honour of the priesthood, the sevenfold grace of the Holy Spirit increasing in them.

But, continues à Kempis, he regarded that as his greatest gain, and as a peculiar joy when he had shown to anyone the way of eternal salvation, and had recalled him from his sins to continence. He was therefore revered by the worldly, honoured by the noble, and most tenderly loved by the good and devout. His sincere life, his perfect love to God, his love to his neighbour, his liberality to the needy, his honourable behaviour to the citizens, his kindness to the afflicted, had made him much beloved by all. Wherefore a certain individual said concerning him, 'There is no religious person whom I so greatly love, nor whom I so greatly fear, as Master Florentius, whom I regard as an angel of God.' But he himself by no means gloried in his own reputation, but in the conversion of men, and the progress of the Brethren, whose number was daily augmented—the Lord conferring His grace more largely from day to day. Hence his name and the tidings of his good fame reached foreign states, and he was much admired, so that not only those present but those that were absent extolled him with high praises. But he neither regarded nor counted as ought the human praises bestowed upon him ; on the contrary, he esteemed them as worthless, and slighted them. For, on one



occasion, having briefly read certain letters commendatory of himself, which had been forwarded to him, he threw them aside, saying: 'Is there nothing else that they can write about? It would have been better if they had been silent concerning this.'

À Kempis records something also respecting *the devout exhortations of Florentius* on making spiritual progress, which were addressed to those at a distance as well as to those nigh at hand, and he shows us how highly esteemed they were. The glance which Thomas gives us of these exhortations is well worthy of notice; and we should bear in mind also that he participated in them, and was profited by them. He says:—

The distinguished and vernal flower of the priesthood, Florentius, the fervid zealot of souls, not only had a care for the Brethren at home, but also endeavoured to plant the seeds of the Word of Salvation in other neighbouring Congregations of the clerics, making sometimes a 'collation' of devout exhortation himself, or through some other suitable Brother of his House, for the preservation of mutual peace and charity. On his arrival all the inhabitants rejoiced, desiring to hear the holy words from the mouth of this priest of God. For the Holy Spirit spake through him to the consolation of the timid flock, who were ready to obey him with alacrity and devotion.

He used to speak in a certain admonitory address, after this manner: 'Every one of you ought daily to propose to himself earnestly to amend his life; to enter on a new struggle against his temptations and vices, the more bravely endeavouring to conquer those which molest him most, and even to use violence towards himself for Christ's sake; because "the Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force." It is useful, also, sometimes to unfold to some discreet Brother, experienced in the way of the Lord, one's infirmities and perplexities, and not to lean on one's own judgment, but rather to trust to another, and humbly to accept advice, and willingly to follow his Rector, because this is a great relief to the newly converted, and a good sign of spiritual advancement. He who thus purposes to serve God, to diligently amend his whole life, and to guard himself from every sin, by this means acquires more, and becomes the more acceptable, than if he should feed a hundred poor persons, and not have such a method of restraining himself; because the greatest gift which a man can offer to God is the good and

perfect will to serve God all the time in which he shall live. Such a one cannot die badly, so long as he shall stand to the resolution he has made. And when he shall die, I believe he will be in a state of salvation, and will find mercy because he had a good purpose, and his good will shall be reckoned to him for merit instead of perfect work, as the holy David confesses, "Thou, O Lord, hast crowned us with Thy good pleasure as with a shield."<sup>1</sup> Many other consolatory things, continues à Kempis, he used to speak for the confirmation of good young men, who from diverse parts had congregated thither, having leisure not only for study in the school of literature, but for spiritual attainments also in the school of Christ.

Some of them were wont to record in their tablets or writing-books the words of the man of God, and with much fervour took great pains to make them known to others who were absent, handling among themselves the divine expressions much more readily than worldly people are wont to recite scurrilous things. Concerning deep questions and subtle things, and intricate matters, he was altogether silent, knowing that these afford little edification to devout minds, frequently hinder compunction of heart, and subvert the hearts of the innocent, as has been experienced in the case of many, who, scrutinising curious points, and leaving the plain and humble way of Christ, have precipitated themselves into many pit-falls and errors.

When a certain learned monk objected to a certain Carthusian, that their Order had leisure for solitude and quiet given them for their own salvation, but that they seemed to produce scarcely any fruit in the Church of God, that good religious man replied right prudently and courteously, saying, 'We would willingly do what you do, preach and teach. But we believe that men are more easily persuaded to a contempt of the world by the labours of penitence, than by fine discourses and wandering about to many places.' A certain Jew, converted to the faith, hearing of Florentius's fame, desired to discuss with him questions concerning the ancient Patriarchs and Prophets, for it seemed to him that Florentius was well versed in the old law and Hebrew Scriptures, and was accordingly called Rabbi by many of the Jews. When, therefore, he came into the presence of the man of God, the latter received him courteously, listened patiently to him, treated him kindly and charitably, persuading him to retain a sincere

<sup>1</sup> Psalm v. 12. In the Bible version we have 'compass him;' in the Prayer Book it is 'defend him;' but in the marginal reference we have, 'crown him,' which is thought to be more expressive of the Hebrew word.

faith in Christ, and to labour in good works. But touching questions of the law not pertaining to salvation, and genealogies of the Ancients, he would discuss nothing, not that he was ignorant, but because they brought in no edification.<sup>1</sup>

Thomas à Kempis now adds some further particulars regarding the efficacy of the discourses of Florentius, and his knowledge of the Scriptures. And here it may be well to introduce a few words about the term *collations* which is frequently used by Thomas à Kempis, and frequently practised by Florentius for conveying religious instruction. They were a kind of familiar discourse in their own language, something between a sermon or set address and a conference, more like a free Bible-class where the members were occasionally asked questions on points connected with the instruction. They were very popular, and ‘served among the brethren as a supplement to preaching.’ They seem to have been first adopted by Gerard or Florentius, for the first mention of them occurs in relation to their being held in the brother-houses.<sup>2</sup> In each of these a collation was given every Sunday afternoon, and also in the afternoon of Saint-days. A passage of Scripture was read, most frequently a portion of the Gospels, which was then explained, and practically applied; then the speaker would at times interrogate the audience, so as to enliven, to impress, and bring home the subject to their hearts. These gatherings for spiritual improvement—in which it was natural that their mother tongue should alone be used—excited great interest among the people, drew many to an anxious concern about their souls, and proved so eminently useful that many bequests were made to the Brethren for the express purpose of instituting them on all holidays. For example, Dick Floriszoon, a priest, about the year 1425, made a gift of his house at Gouda for an establishment of the Brothers under the condition, that upon every

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Florentii*, chap. xxiii. 1, 2, 3, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Delprat, s. 104. G. Bonet-Maury says of these ‘collations,’ or familiar conferences, that they were much enjoyed by the people, who listened to the fervent words of the brethren with attention, and made the Brothers of Common Life very popular in the Low Country (p. 51).

holiday they should deliver addresses, suitable, advantageous, and useful to common man.<sup>1</sup> As we have seen too in the previous pages, the Brothers of the several houses also endeavoured mutually to edify each other by such addresses, Florentius going himself occasionally to those in other parts to give a *collation*, or causing one of his Brethren well qualified to go for this purpose. 'The diligence of the Brethren in this way penetrated, but never intrusively, even into private families. It will be seen in the case of John Gronde, whose life by Thomas à Kempis will shortly be given, and whose sweet voice attracted both the ear and heart of those who heard him, that sometimes when sitting at table in a private house he would, when called upon, address the company and instruct them with edifying words. But we turn to what Thomas à Kempis says respecting the addresses given by Florentius. He relates that:—

The discourse of the reverend Priest was not a soothing adulation, but a clear setting forth of the Truth, not worldly eloquence, but a humble instruction of manners, and a reasonable inducement for the renunciation of the world by the example of the Saints. For neither did he seek money from the rich, nor honour among the noble; but his manner of discourse was very free with the simple sort, in behalf of whom he urged the powerful that they should be mindful of the poor, and make to themselves friends out of the mammon of unrighteousness in the tabernacles of the heavenly kingdom. For who could easily deny him ought for which he was willing to plead? It was feared as an offence against God, when anyone would not hear him in the matter for which he petitioned.

Once there came to him a pastor and curé of Deventer—a good friend of his—obsequiously displaying his kindness and saving, 'O my beloved Florentius, if I can do you any favour, do not spare me.' To whom the pious Father replied, 'Nothing of this at the present, unless it be that you show yourself kind to the devout Brothers and Sisters placed under your care, that they be not molested by worldly and wicked persons.' He lovingly at once consented and replied, 'I will willingly do that for the love of God and for your sake, that you also may be mindful of me.'

<sup>1</sup> Delprat, s. 53.



. . . Thus by a spirit of discretion he knew how to answer every one, and by the gift of counsel he assisted with salutary remedies both the wise and ignorant oppressed with various cares, requiring no earthly advantage for these things. So that a certain person committing himself to his direction used to say, 'As often as I have followed the advice of Florentius, I have succeeded well; and when I have leaned upon my own understanding, evil always befel me, or I have repented that I have not done as he told me.'

His understanding the Holy Scriptures was as if some heavenly ray shone brightly in upon him; for he was enlightened with so great a purity of the Divine perception, that whether he read in the Old or in the New Testament, in every part the mystic sense occurred to him; and whenever he found anything that was instructive to him, he attributed it to God, the fountain of all knowledge, and the end of words. He used to have always by him some simple and moral books, and chiefly the 'Mirror of the Monks,'<sup>1</sup> and certain exercises of virtue against vice, with which

<sup>1</sup> We have selected a few extracts from a copy of this work, which we give below, as they will be found to be in accordance with the teaching of Thomas à Kempis, and point out one of the sources from which his spiritual instructor drew many words of counsel which he himself followed and taught to others.

'Make haste to the choir as to a place of refuge and the garden of spiritual delights. Until the divine offices begin, study to keep your mind in simplicity and peace, free from troubles and the multiplicity of uncertain thoughts, collecting a godly and sweet affection towards your God by sincere meditation and prayer.'—P. 23.

'Reject likewise too troublesome care, which commonly bringeth with it pusillanimity and restlessness, and persevere with a gentle, quiet, and watchful spirit in the praises of God without singularity.'—P. 24.

'When impediments happen and you are not able to perform as much as you would, when, I say, distraction of your senses, dejection of mind, dryness of heart, grief of head, or any other misery or temptation afflict you, beware you say not, "I am left: our Lord hath cast me away, my duty pleaseth Him not." These are words befitting the children of distrust. Endure therefore with a patient and joyful mind all things for His sake who hath called and chosen you, firmly believing that He is near to those that are of a contrite heart.'—P. 28.

'Endeavour to repel all restlessness of heart which choketh the true peace and perfect trust in God with all spiritual proceedings: let not vicious idleness at any time take place, for it destroyeth souls. Avoid also idle businesses—I mean those that are unprofitable. Neither marvel at this kind of speech: let not *vicious* idleness at any time take place, for there is also a commendable idleness, which is when the soul is fixed on God, and, exempted from the noise and imaginations of sensible things, doth rest as it were idle in internal silence and in the most blessed embracement of the Beloved; to which if the Lord bring you, you shall profitably and happily be idle.'—Pp. 52, 53.

he taught himself and his fellow-soldiers, in the warfare of Christ, to triumph against the temptations of the devil. But the novices and the imperfect, and those swelling with worldly pride and still infected with carnal love, he dissuaded from reading deep, subtle, obscure, and doubtful works, or searching into curious things.

The first thing he taught them, therefore, was that they should learn to humble themselves, and to know thoroughly their own defects ; to yield complete obedience to their superiors, to prefer themselves to no one, to keep peace and concord with all men, to have the fear of God always in their minds, to lay a firm foundation in humility, and thus at length to ascend to the height of understanding, and to the light of Divine judgment, through the indwelling grace of the Holy Spirit, promised to pure hearts in that sentence of the Lord, ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.’

But those who study to seem more subtle than humble, and seek more to obtain knowledge than to live well, quickly become elated and are carnal. Such persons he was accustomed sharply to rebuke, and in a wholesome way to recall to a knowledge of their defects, through humiliations and frequent discipline. When, however, it was necessary that he should reprove any one, he was so feared that no one dared to contradict him or to excuse himself, out of reverence for his holy bearing, which none cared to offend, fearing to incur the wrath of God, if he did not humbly obey his words.<sup>1</sup>

To show how careful he was of his words, especially

‘Thy God doth not despise thee because thou art imperfect and infirm, but loveth thee exceedingly, because thou desirest and labourest to be more perfect. He also will help thee, if thou persist in thy good intentions, and will make thee more perfect.’—P. 79.

‘God requireth of thee purity of mind, not the overthrow of thy body. He would that thou shouldst subject it to the spirit, not that thou shouldst oppress it ; therefore in external exercises as well as internal, temper the fervour of thy mind with holy discretion.’—P. 181.

‘There are many that so long as they feel no checks, no injuries, no losses, no temptations, no troubles, do seem devout, patient, and humble, but as soon as they are once touched by them, they proudly show by murmuring, indignation, and impatience, how little they are mortified. Wherefore, before anyone can be thought to have attained to the true abnegation of himself, he must necessarily endure many adversities with a voluntary and quiet mind.’—P. 205.

‘The night will pass away and the darkness will disperse, and the light will take its place, but so long as it is night, be not idle or negligent.’

‘God rejoiceth to adorn the soul that is perfectly joined to Him.’

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Florentii*, ch. xxiv.

before those leading secular lives, and how he endeavoured to avoid giving offence, à Kempis records that :—

On a certain occasion being appointed to lecture at Amersford, he was received very reverently by the inhabitants and great men of the place, whom he sometimes visited with loving devotion. On such occasions, certain honourable men came to hear him discourse, and to be instructed by good examples and doctrines. These he kindly treated, giving them wholesome exhortation, according to their condition, so that they returned to their homes, after the hearing of the Word of God, with a singular operation of grace. But when they were gone away, he presently addressed this brief admonition to the Brethren, ‘It is a dangerous thing to speak with, and to be connected with nobles and worldly persons.’

He was not eager to compliment rich men, nor did he think it meet to speak harsh words to them. On that account he gave them to understand that it behoves a man to cautiously consider beforehand what he should say to such persons, lest they should become scandalised by any light word, or unbecoming act. For they have their eyes upon us, he would say, to observe our actions, on account of the good things they hear of us. Let us stand, therefore, on our guard, and set a good example to those who visit us and seek after us, who see only external things and judge of the interior according to these. Although we are not perfect in all things, yet we must take care lest we set a bad example, and give an occasion of falling to the weak. They are very kind to us, and this perchance does not profit us. We who ought to be simple and humble should not be pleased with vain favours. It is better, therefore, to return quickly to our former place, because many there care less for us, and some even deride and reproach us, which is very profitable for us, and compels us to return the more to God.

Florentius forbade all swearing, which in those days was very common, an oath being uttered for the most trivial matter. He himself was careful of the words he used, for, continues à Kempis—

When he wished to express anything remarkable or serious, or when it was needful to say anything in the way of assurance, he did not lightly and rashly interpose the note of swearing, but in a ready manner replied, ‘I tell you finally,’ or ‘for certain,’ and so he satisfied the inquirer. Nor was he willing to speak too posi-

tively, concerning anything for which he might be blamed, but mindful of the word of the Lord, 'Yea, yea: and nay, nay,' he endeavoured to guard against a slip of the tongue, and to teach others by a good example and the simple utterance of the truth. Whence he was more believed without an oath, than the tongues of other men who had fallen into the habit of much swearing.<sup>1</sup>

We have now some admonitions given respecting the life of the 'Religious'; for in another chapter à Kempis proceeds to say, that this 'most expert and vigorous athlete in spiritual things used to state that there were three very dangerous temptations which deceived many persons under the pretext of doing good. And unless they were resisted in time at the beginning, they gradually led to a perverse end, or drew the slothful into a miserable lukewarmness. But what is worse, many, through the craft of diabolical fraud, turn too incautiously to those temptations, so that even, as he says, the prudent and skilful can scarcely be taught into what great dangers they may fall.' Of the temptations:—

One is, when some one newly converted desires to go back to his country to visit his parents and his friends. For with the object of doing good, and the hopes of converting the worldly, he returns to the world, thinking to bear fruit in his own locality; from such an occasion it often arises that he neglects himself. And whilst lingering, he passes into vain and slippery ways, and dangerously exposes himself to the winds and waves. Because—as frequent experience teaches—when the fickle mind, not yet confirmed in virtue, is freely joined to the worldly, it either becomes involved in their sins, or cools down from the good already begun. It is good, therefore, for a man to avoid everything that hurts the soul, and that he should not again seek his country or friends without some extraordinary cause. Never should he presume upon himself, but let him esteem the present world full of poisoned snares, and to be mistrusted, and let him always follow the counsel and dictates of his Superior, which in every event is safer and more to be depended upon. For out of ten who hold long intercourse with their kinsfolk and acquaintance, scarcely one or two return uninjured. And very often also those who, desisting from a good purpose, remain long in the world, become

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Florentii*, ch. xxv.



worse and more vain than others ; and throwing from them the favour of God, do not blush to return to the evil ways, which they before despised.

Another temptation is, when a laic wishes to become a cleric ;<sup>1</sup> and so on that account relinquishes a humble position and draws back from the sacred Congregation, in order that, his learning being acknowledged, he may become a great master ; but the wretched man knows not how greatly he is deceived, who, having abandoned humility and obedience, stretches out his mind to lofty things. He who is learned in his own opinion is quickly puffed up with a little knowledge, does not so soon become a good cleric, gives up virtue for vile literature, and blackens the fame of his good name : would that he did not become wholly secular !

A third temptation is, when a cleric and learned man aspires to Holy Orders, to a Superiorship, or other dignity, under some plea of sanctity, that he may be able to profit others more, to teach better and to preach more frequently. This man, although he may seem to have a pious intention, yet inwardly labours with great pride, whilst he hastens to climb by himself, that he may appear greater than others. And because he loves not humble subjection, and unwillingly endures contempt, he seeks the suffrages of promotion by entreaties, or the provision of friends, not heeding the danger to his soul. Alas ! how evil will he find his conscience after a little while, and how short the possession of glory ; how difficult it is to attain, and how much more easily can one be deprived of every honour !

He who desires to be freed from these three temptations, continues à Kempis, should daily ask God, that He would preserve him from pride and vain glory, and keep him in humble subjection and perfect obedience. For pride makes a man inwardly blind and foolish, and externally garrulous and presumptuous, ignorant of himself and contemptuous of others ; and what is worse, he seeks to obtain dominion over others—a sufficient open sign of perdition, and the introduction of many evils. When any Brother spoke to Florentius in his room, he was wont to say to him among other things : ‘ Aim to give yourself to humility, then will you be able to make progress, and to gain the favour of God.’<sup>2</sup>

Drawing to the close of the biographical sketch which Thomas à Kempis gives us of Florentius, we have, in the

<sup>1</sup> *I.e.* a writer, not necessarily a clergyman.

<sup>2</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Florentii*, ch. xxvi.

chapter previous to that in which he records his last moments, particular mention made of the number of persons influenced by him to lead holy lives ; some occupying posts of importance, others sent out by him as missionaries to various places, with some intimation of the fruitfulness of their labours. It serves also to give a general view, as witnessed by our author, of the religious movement that was set on foot and carried on by the Brothers of Common Life, with Florentius at their head ; and it shows how much good, by the grace of God, may be done by one man with a single aim, a self-sacrificing devotion to the service of his Redeemer ; what a train of blessings are set in motion ; how many others are awakened to care for souls, and to live for the praise and glory of God. The account is thus given by Thomas :—

That ardent lover of Christ, Master Florentius, ‘to whom to live was Christ, and to die was gain,’ desiring to produce fruit in his time, gave the greatest care to profit many for the kingdom of Eternal Salvation, persuading them to despise this miserable and fallen world. He, therefore, sent many persons to different Monasteries, also to build up fresh Houses for the conversion of others. Among these, some went to Windesheim, some to Mount St. Agnes, some to Northorn, some into Gelderland, and some into Holland. Some also were made Priors of Monasteries, some Rectors of Congregations, and Confessors of Religious Houses. Some of whom are still surviving who formerly knew this most devout master Florentius, beloved of God, when he was alive in the flesh, and are able to furnish indubitable testimony of his great sanctity.

The sacred Carthusian Order, and also the Cistercian,<sup>1</sup> and that of St. Benedict, have men not unknown to me, who enjoyed the opportunity of seeing and hearing the man Florentius, and the Brothers of his sacred Congregation, when they frequented Deventer, who can prove the truth of what I say. There were, at the very time when that distinguished priest of God shone and flourished in Deventer, several devout priests in the Diocese of Utrecht, who instructed the Faithful with holy discourses, and knew how to govern strictly Religious Houses, whether of Brothers or Sisters. All these with due reverence used humbly to submit

<sup>1</sup> These two orders are especially mentioned in the *De Imitatione Christi*, for their exemplary piety.—Lib. i. cap. xxv. s. 8.

themselves to Florentius, and very gladly consulted the angelic man in difficult cases, preferring rather to trust to his discretion and prudence than to their own. For they saw that in him the grace of Divine counsel abounded in a more exalted manner than in others; for, like a Lily of the Valley bedewed with the water of wisdom, he preserved the whiteness of his purity in the midst of crowds, and scattered far and wide the odour of his excellent fame.

There was also at that time in Utrecht, Master Wormbold, a famous preacher and Confessor of the Sisters of St. Cecilia, a fervent lover of the Holy Scriptures, and a great friend of the reverend Father Florentius, who was most favourably esteemed and heard by the whole community of the people. At Amersford there was William Henry, who began the congregation of Clerics, which afterwards became Canons Regular. In Zwolle there was Henry Gonde, a celebrated preacher, a despiser of money, and a humble Confessor of the Beguines; and Gerard Kalker, Rector of the devout Clerics, and a most excellent instructor of virtue. In various parts of Holland there were very notable priests, learned and illustrious in the law of the Lord, being conspicuous in word and deed, of whom some were colleagues of Gerard the Great, and most cordially loved by Florentius, who produced in their localities not a little fruit to the Lord in the conversion of men, and in the building of Convents for the Devotees. In Haarlem there was Master Hugo, called among his priests 'the golden speaker.' In Amsterdam, Gisebert Dou, Founder of two Monasteries, and the distinguished Ruler of many Sisters. In Medenblik, Master Paul, entirely devoted to God and to virtuous living. Of these Gerard makes mention also in his letters, and by means of these, the devotion in Holland first began and progressed.

Moreover there was in the lower provinces of Germany, in Doesbruch, Master Derik Gruter, the praiseworthy Father of many Sisters, an old disciple of Gerard, who told me many good things concerning him. It is a long matter, continues à Kempis, to mention each of the devout Fathers by name, who began from Gerard's time, and were contemporaries of Florentius, who taught us to despise the vanities of the world, and who have left to all who succeed them bright examples of devout conversation, by their patience and obedience.<sup>1</sup>

These men were, then, more or less the intimate friends

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Florentii*, cap. xxvii.

of Florentius, whom à Kempis knew, and were witnesses of his exemplary, enthusiastic, and self-devoted life, and were ready to testify to the abundant fruit of his labours in the vineyard of the Lord, how much they delighted in his friendship, and were animated by his example, and how he became to many as a shining light in a dark and dangerous world to guide them into the way of life.

We now come to the closing scene of this good man's life. À Kempis, his devoted disciple and biographer, was probably not present at the hour when he died. From what will shortly be said respecting his movements, it would appear that he had upon the advice of Florentius left Deventer a few months before this sad event took place; but he had several beloved friends among the Brothers who gave him a faithful account of what happened; and he thus recounts the happy passage from this world of his beloved preceptor and spiritual guide, in his own peculiar way:—

The most benign Jesus, the Author and Redeemer of all the Faithful—the most faithful Promiser and abundant Bestower of Eternal Life, Who says, ‘Every one who has left Father and Mother, and other earthly things, for My Name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall possess Eternal Life’—for the rewarding of His faithful servant, the pious Florentius, adorned with many virtues and proved by various tribulations and weaknesses, deemed him worthy to be delivered from this slave-prison (ergastulo) of the body, and to be translated into His Celestial Kingdom among the rejoicing angels.

Very many devout Congregations and Monasteries having been founded by his counsel and help; and the humble flock of his House having been orderly instructed and solicitously guarded in peace and fraternal love, according to the good pleasure of Christ,—he inwardly sighed to behold the citizens of the heavenly country, and the glory of Christ—trusting to Christ Jesus, Whom he loved above all things. He besought therefore, with sincere devotion, that the Body of the Lord might be administered to him, the which beholding and adoring with full faith and worthy veneration, he said, ‘O my beloved Lord God, pardon me, that I have so often unworthily handled and received Thee.’ Many, being smitten with compunction at these words,



wept. And one of the Canons hearing them was deeply moved, saying, 'What then shall I, a wretched sinner, say, if so excellent a man thinks and speaks thus of himself?' But the man being full of God, and strengthened with the grace of Christ, committed himself entirely to the Divine pleasure; and so long as he was able to speak anything, uttered words of wholesome consolation to his beloved Sons and Brethren.

Among other things worthy to be remembered, he commended the unity of brotherly love, saying: 'All those who dwell in one house should think one thing, and have one purpose in the Lord, and should always endeavour to preserve a conformity of manners, without any singularity, in simple obedience to their Superiors. There is peace, there is spiritual growth, where all in fervour of spirit strive to be of one mind, and conform themselves in all things to the humility of Christ. Remain in your humble simplicity, and Christ will remain with you.' After this sacred exhortation, lest the flock of the Lord, dwelling amidst popular commotions, should remain without a Ruler, as if destitute of a proper pilot, he appointed over his entire congregations one of his priests, Master Amilius, a devout man, wise and learned, and having constantly a zeal for God and the salvation of souls, that each individual might have recourse to him, and obey him 'ex animo.' These and other matters being quickly settled, and his bodily infirmity now increasing, he arrived at the extremity of this present life.

When, therefore, the most solemn festival of the Annunciation of our Lord had come,<sup>1</sup> the most devout Vicar of Christ, Florentius, an inward lover of the most blessed, ever Virgin Mary, most loving mother of Jesus Christ, terminated his life on earth, after the hour of compline, the 'Ave Maria' being sung in the usual manner to the praise of the Blessed Virgin, the day having just drawn to its close, and while his Brethren were praying around him, with lamentation and great heaviness of heart. And no wonder. For the power of intense love compelled them to weep for so dear a father, when the light and mirror of all the devout, the solace of all the sufferers, was taken away from this temporal light. But the pious faith of those who loved him, reflecting on the sobriety and modesty of the life of this most excellent priest, was consoled by the hope of celestial glory that would not be denied to him through Jesus Christ, Whom he loved with all his

<sup>1</sup> The Annunciation, though it has some relation to the blessed Virgin, does yet more peculiarly belong to our Saviour.—*Vide* Wheatley on Common Prayer, ch. v. sec. 28.

heart, to Whom he perseveringly clung unto death, by serving Him in the full devotion of faith.

Florentius passed away from this world in the year of the Incarnation of the Lord 1400, in the time of Pope Boniface IX., and in the year of his age, as I think, says à Kempis, fifty, or not much older. He lived, therefore, after the venerable Master Gerard, in a good and holy conversation, some sixteen years, in which period he produced great fruit among the people of God in Deventer, and throughout the whole Diocese of Utrecht. For whose praiseworthy life praise and glory be to Christ for ever, Who adorned our times with a star of so bright a lustre. On the day following, the Canons and Clerics being assembled, his frail body, chastened with long discipline, was carried in procession to the church of St. Lebuin, by the Canons and Presbyters, and the funeral rites being performed, he was buried before the altar consecrated to St. Paul. But he himself, the elect priest of God, like a true humble servant of Christ, had wished to be buried in the cemetery with his Brethren who had died before him, and that no greater honours should be paid to him. But the Reverend Master Rambert, Dean of Deventer, altogether forbade this, and more properly decreed that he should be buried with honour in the church, in a distinguished place, since he had been an illustrious priest of the same church, distinguished for his virtues and knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

It is impossible not to perceive what a powerful influence for good such a life must have exercised upon Thomas à Kempis whilst a young man, ready and susceptible of taking impressions of holy living, and carrying out everything that would conduce to his growth in grace. And for what Thomas afterwards became, and for the goodly fruit which he bore to the glory of God, and in the salvation of souls, the Christian world is much indebted to Florentius. This sketch of the life of Florentius, moreover, gives us a more general insight into the ways, manners, and spirit, which prevailed at first among the Brothers of Common Life, than we could otherwise obtain, and will enable the reader to carry away with him a more complete idea of the religious movement that was begun more than a century before the Reformation, and which augured so

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Florentii*, cap. xxviii.

well at the beginning, but afterwards became overpowered by the dominant spirit of evil which spread itself like a blight upon the world on every side.

As Thomas à Kempis has appended to the *Life of Florentius* a collection of his sayings, which he carefully preserved, a few of them will here be given as a fitting close to his history.

‘Before all things know what your vices and your passions are. Always be vigilant about temptation and the motions of your passions. If you feel them and immediately reject them, they will not hurt you. If you attend to them it is evil; if you delight in them as well as tarry in them, it is worse.’

‘I consider that the emotions and thoughts which rise in our hearts are not in our own power. But it lies with us, by reading, prayer, and reflection, to implant that which is good in our hearts, until the forbidden motions are overcome, and, through God’s grace, depart.’

‘You will have a good conscience and a sound understanding, when you conform your life wholly to sacred Scripture, and interpret it, not according to your own fancy, but as the saints have done.’

‘Whatever is for the public good, we ought solicitously to guard as the sacred vessels of the altar.’

‘The books of Holy Scripture are to be kept as the best treasure of the Church.’

‘In doing what is good, do it simply and purely for the glory of God, and wholly without self-seeking.’

‘In praying, you should rather ask for grace and mercy of the Lord, than for any great reward.’

‘Learn to understand what you pray for, and thus you will expel all wandering thoughts.’

‘Devotion is lost by hurrying too quickly over your prayers.’

‘A small measure of the Spirit is better than great learning without piety.’

‘Before engaging in any enterprise, resolve within yourself how you are to behave, and from that resolution do not lightly swerve.’

‘Preface every labour with a short prayer.’

‘Fly to your cell as to a friend. Accustom yourself to stay in your cell, and read some book till you take pleasure in it, and feel it irksome to leave, and pleasant to enter.’

‘All things will become sweet to a man, when he has thoroughly exercised himself in the passion of our Lord.’

‘We ought without intermission to lift up our hearts to heaven, and to have recourse to the sacred Scriptures, and often to sigh that we are so carnal, and so indolent in seeking after eternal good.’

‘The devil is well read in the Scriptures, but is none the better for it.’

‘The devil will then in truth flee from us when he beholds us humble and united, because he is the father of pride and dissension.’

‘We ought not to have regard to our neighbour as handsome or rich, but as redeemed by the blood of Christ.’

‘If I have nothing great to offer, I will give what I have; as Mary’s offering was a pair of turtle-doves, and not a lamb.’

‘From an inconsiderate use of words, confusion, offences, and contradictions, arise.’

‘Consider therefore *what* you do, *wherefore* you do it, and *in what way* you do it; because that is not a light thing in which God is offended, and your neighbour scandalised.’

‘You ought always to endeavour to edify those who listen to you, and you should draw them more to the service of Christ; since nothing is more pleasing to God than to labour for the conversion of souls.’

‘A portion of the Spirit is better than much knowledge without devotion.’

‘The barter of fair words is a very light thing, but the devising of good works is difficult.’

‘Never be idle, but engaging mostly in holy occupations, direct your affections and all your labours to God.’<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ‘Quædam notabilia verba Domini Florentii presbyteri.’—Sec. I to 15.



## CHAPTER X.

Memoirs by à Kempis of his two principal friends whilst at Deventer—

(1) Arnold of Schoonhoven—Brought early into close contact with him—Signs of great devotion in Arnold which kindles that of à Kempis—A further description of Arnold's pious doings, with an account of his death—A Kempis's design in giving short sketches of the Early Brothers of Common Life—(2) The other friend, John Kettel, the cook—Once a successful merchant, having at first ambitious designs of entering the ministry—Brought into the company of Florentius and the Brothers, a great change effected—Henceforth he will only occupy a lowly place in the Brotherhood—His humility, self-abnegation, his fervour, his zeal for souls, and his charity to the poor—Several anecdotes of him, with a singular account of his death—A Kempis sets a great value on godly friendships.

THERE were two valuable friendships which Thomas à Kempis formed whilst dwelling with 'the Brothers of Common Life' at Deventer. One was with a young man much of his own age, and engaged in the clerical profession—not necessarily entering Holy Orders, but devoting himself to the sacred work of writing out the Holy Scriptures and other devout books. The other friend was one of the lay-members of the Community, and several years older than Thomas. Both of them, as he shows us, were very lowly in their own eyes, but of rare excellency in all that pertained to the true following of Christ.

The chief companion of Thomas à Kempis at Deventer, and the earliest of his most intimate friends, was *Arnold of Schoonhoven*, a youth of fervent piety, who from childhood was singularly devoted to God. He was, as à Kempis tells us, the son of an upright and honourable citizen of that town, named *Wyron*, and had by his father's leave come to Deventer to place himself under the guidance and instruction of Father Florentius, by the fame of whose piety he

had been attracted. His real love for devotion and desire for God's holy presence and favour, displayed itself even before he came under the special direction of Florentius ; for whilst yet in the house of his parents, he was accustomed before he went to school to enter the Church early in the morning, and there, at one of the altars, he would offer up his prayers and thanksgivings to Almighty God, and for a little space pour forth his heart. This devout behaviour in his childhood gave certain indications of a fuller measure of grace to be attained in riper years ; for placing himself day by day under the special protection of the Almighty, he remained free from the contagion of carnal lust.

On coming to Deventer he earnestly besought Father Florentius to receive him, and to be permitted to board and lodge in the house of the devout Clerics, that he might share their lot, and be under the care and discipline of the pious Fathers. Florentius did not at once listen to his intreaty, but wishing to prove him, whether he was steadfast in his desire, and at the same time not to discourage him, he said : ' You must first learn to write well, and then there will be some hope respecting you.' Harkening to this advice, he made strenuous endeavours to learn the art of writing so as to copy books with a fair hand ; and often, turning to certain good writing, he would express a strong desire to learn from it a more perfect hand ; for he said to me, ' Oh that I knew how to write well, that I might the sooner go to live with Father Florentius ! I hope by the grace of God I shall soon be able to conquer my imperfections, so that I may presently know how to write as I ought.'

There was an admirable simplicity of heart and humility, mixed with his earnestness that was peculiarly attractive. On one occasion when a young man was talking with Father Florentius concerning the vice of vain glory, and asking for a remedy for it, Arnold happened at the very time to be passing before them at a little distance ; and upon seeing him Florentius said to the young man, ' What do you say concerning that Brother ? Has he any vain glory ?'

The young man, who in all probability might be Thomas himself, replied, 'I think that he has none.' Upon which Florentius answered, 'Well, I believe it is as you say.' After this Florentius having sufficiently proved Arnold, was much drawn towards him because of the zeal and constancy which he displayed ; for discerning in Arnold an earnest desire to devote himself entirely to the service of God, and that he was wholly averse to engage in secular things, Florentius eventually, as Thomas tells the story, granted him a lodging in his own ancient house, where several clerics lived in strict obedience to the holy counsels and precepts of their superior, the younger ones still labouring diligently for a certain portion of the day at their school lessons, which they were not allowed to neglect.

Now the gaining a place in the house of the fraternity was a most joyful thing to Arnold, for which he returned very hearty thanks to God. And, as if he had been converted anew and called to a more perfect state of life, he studied to behave himself very zealously and humbly, that he might be an example to every one of virtue and self-subjection. He relaxed nothing of his former devotion ; and was most attentive to keep the good customs delivered to him by the older Brethren. He submitted to discipline with all his heart, exercising himself daily in renewed endeavours after holiness of life, according to that admonition of the Apostle, 'Be renewed in the Spirit of your minds.' (Eph. iv. 23.) He shook off all drowsiness of spirit, betaking himself with alacrity to watching and praying, still exercising great pains in writing, and by his loving and pious persuasions, inclining the negligent to desire what was good.

By a singular coincidence Thomas was admitted to this Brother-house about the same period, for he says :— 'At the same time, by means of Florentius and with his permission, I also came to dwell in that very House, and I remained in that Society for nearly twelve months, both of us being contented to occupy together one little chamber and one bed.'

The example of his young friend Arnold's glowing piety evidently made a deep impression upon him ; for he continues : ' Many signs of devotion did I notice in Arnold because he was much more exemplary and devout at home and in private, than could be noticed in the school, though he was kind and courteous to all, and not given to annoying or injuring any. Every morning at 4 o'clock the bell was rung for a quarter of an hour, when Arnold would immediately rise with alacrity, and upon his bended knees would utter a short prayer, pouring forth his soul to God, and then, quickly dressing himself, would hasten to the House of Prayer.' He was in no hurry, however, in his morning devotions, but went leisurely and seriously through them, being in no wise a hindrance to others, since he took special care to be wholly occupied with the sacred duty in which he was employed. He made ready to be with the first that went to the Holy Sacrament, and bending lowly before the altar, he listened to the Eucharistic Office with reverential and uplifted soul. Nor did he cease praying and meditating until the solemnities of the holy Ordinance were entirely finished.

Besides, he loved some secret place, where he was not likely to be disturbed, and where he could devote himself to prayer and meditation unobserved. And so much the more fervently did he pray, observes his friend à Kempis, in proportion as he knew that he was doing it in secret. He shunned the presence of men at such moments lest he should in some measure be noticed for his devotion, taking care not to raise his voice too high lest he should be heard, because it was his desire to lay open his heart to God only in secret prayer.

À Kempis was especially privileged by occasionally witnessing these outpourings of his friend's soul, unknown to him at times ; and yet at other times it was as if Arnold were not unwilling that à Kempis should be near the sacred Shekinah, when its glory and grace were unfolded to him, since the Providence of God had drawn them so close together, and they were so like-minded in their desire



to attain more grace to walk in newness of life before God. For speaking about his friend Arnold at such moments he says :—

Yet he was not always able to hide himself so entirely but that, unwittingly letting his light shine, he was heard in church. It often happened, therefore, that I was joyfully encouraged in my devotions through his fervour, so that I carefully took heed to what I was doing whilst at God's footstool ; for I was animated to more earnest prayer by beholding such grace in devotion as he seemed commonly to possess every day. Nor need we wonder, he continues, that he, who was so devout in prayer, continually kept a watchful guard over his heart and lips wherever he went. So great too was the sweetness of his devotions that the sound of gladness could be heard in his throat as if he were tasting some delicious liquor, just according to what is said by the Psalmist, ' My mouth shall praise Thee with joyful lips.'<sup>1</sup>

Here was the very companion every way suited for Thomas à Kempis in his early life to promote his growth in grace and holiness, and one in whose congenial society he could always find refreshment and delight. The one became very dear to the other, for they found in each other that harmony of soul and sympathy of disposition that earnest minds most crave after and desire. Truly the value and blessing of godly companionship cannot be over-estimated ! It is one of God's best gifts to the children of men ! and next to that of having godly parents it is productive of the greatest good ; nay, sometimes when the influence of parents is unheeded, it sweetly and gradually draws the soul away from evil, to desire a better life, in the striving to please God. How hallowed is the sacred tie which thus binds one soul to another ! What a safeguard ! how healthful, cheering, and strengthening ! It gives a delight and sweet fervour to religion, which greatly helps and encourages the youthful disciples of our Lord to persevere : the difficulties and hindrances which meet them in the narrow way are more easily overcome, temptations lose half their force, sorrow much of its bitterness, and even death its terror, as the one can with the other look up to

<sup>1</sup> Ps, lxxiii. 5.

Jesus as the Captain of their Salvation, under whose banner they have fought side by side ; whilst they both can look forward to a happy reunion in the home of the saints, when they have severally finished their course on earth.

This friendship which à Kempis contracted with Arnold in the Brother-house at Deventer lasted as long as the latter lived, and was not diminished by time or weakened by separation. Though it was impossible through circumstances to hold such intimate intercourse with each other as they did in their early years, yet they had a mutual confidence and deep-lasting regard for each other, which made the seasons of their occasionally meeting together afterwards moments of exquisite pleasure. À Kempis lived the longest, and consequently he gives us this account, from which we select a few other details of Arnold's life, which still further illustrate the spirit that pervaded the Society of which he was so worthy a representative, and sets before us the example which Thomas himself admired, and was animated by ; for it appears from the account which he gives us, that in his own estimation—ever thinking humbly of himself—he fell short of his friend's stature in grace, and that, in comparison with him, he was not satisfied with his own zeal in devotion. Simple and uneventful as the incidents may appear in the narrative which Thomas draws of his friend, they are nevertheless as the fine touches of the painter's hand in perfecting his picture, not in the rhetorical language of poetic fancy, but in the unadorned garb of truthful diction ; for he draws the portrait of one who had become lovely with the beauty of holiness, by the following of Him who said, 'Learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly of heart.'

It was his endeavour, says à Kempis, to maintain such grace in devotion, and so to persevere in diligent prayer, that it never might be said of him that he had received the grace of God in vain. Therefore before he read any book, or began to write, he would briefly pray, lifting up his soul to God. And he did the like when he had ended his work, giving thanks. Before leaving the house also, or on returning home, he would bend low before

the presence of Christ, praying and entreating a blessing upon his work.

At every hour when the bell sounded, he engaged in a short religious exercise : and this he did, as often as he frequented the schools. And frequently, on his way, if he saw the door of the church open, he gladly entered the building, either before or after being at the school, or else he bent himself lowly towards the church. He never knowingly omitted any duty, however little it might be. He gratefully received admonitions concerning any small matter that was named to him, studiously taking care to amend. Every word spoken by his Superior, or his Vicar, he humbly received, and with such reverence as if he had heard it from the mouth of God or some one of the saints ; neither did he dare to disobey, or so much as question what was said to him. Therefore, adds Thomas, he had inwardly great peace, and was as dear to God as he was to men, and was as one that always rejoiced in the Lord, whilst ready to obey every command.

Before the Festivals of Christ or of the Saints, he studied to prepare himself with great intention for the Holy Communion, and was accustomed to say, 'Now the great festival is at hand, let us prepare ourselves devoutly to receive the Lord.' Also, 'To-day is the festival of such a saint, let us fervently implore his suffrages.'

He did not yield to external matters, but leisurely read the appointed lessons in the sacred pages, often silently praying, or very earnestly breathing forth his soul, though it was chiefly in his little room that he sought God's presence. If he found anything he considered worthy of notice he showed it to his intimate companion, or handed it forth to be read by others, so that he might draw them from light and vain discourse to things sacred and good.

On the festival days he brought not a few that came to the city, of whatever age or condition they were, to the house of Florentius, to hear him discourse, rejoicing, and hoping for the conversion of some of them. And being inspired by God, he was not disappointed of his desire, since he saw the fruit of his labours every day in the improved conduct of both the young and old. His own converse with them, and his exhortations, were not respecting lofty and speculative matters or on secular things, but concerning true conversion to God, and the amendment of life in the world. And he was more serviceable in this honest simplicity of devout conversation than in the subtlety of Latin discourse.

Afterwards, therefore, when he seemed sufficiently advanced in learning, he relinquished scholastic studies, and confined his attention almost entirely to those that were spiritual ; and forgetting home, and parents, and his own country for the sake of things Eternal, he readily submitted himself to the yoke of obedience, to the discipline of the Clerics, according to the laudable customs of the ancient house originally appointed by the most devout Father Florentius.

Arnold had a pleasant manner with the Brethren without frivolity ; yet he was not given to much speaking, since he placed a watch over his mouth ; and whenever subjects for edification were introduced among them, he was much more willing to listen than to give instruction. He was faithful and fervent in his work, and was grieved if he could not assist the Brethren in some manner when they had to rise at night. Before the hour for writing, he was accustomed to prepare his pens, so that he might thereby write more expeditiously, and be more at liberty to further the common welfare. Thus he endeavoured constantly to pursue his ordinary work so that the Brethren should not be impeded through him, but that he might the rather be somewhat useful to them. And to this end also he cheerfully engaged in common and exterior works.

His great pleasure, however, seemed to be in carrying out explicitly the will of the Rector, highly esteeming his every word and action, and fulfilling his orders as if they had been given from heaven. And thus, continues Thomas, not only in his youth, but to the end of his life he remained as innocent, obedient, and submissive, as a child. In his dress also, as well as in his discourse and manners, he exhibited humility and modesty, always trying to gain over to better ways those in whom he noticed any rudeness of behaviour, or had perceived any defects. He was wont also to seek the lowest place for himself, not feignedly, but willingly.

So very like is all this to the character of à Kempis that we might fancy he had been drawing a picture of himself ; à Kempis certainly sought to live after a similar fashion, and consequently found in Arnold of Schoonhoven a congenial friend and companion in the way of godliness. In concluding his story he gives us a short account of the close of Arnold's life. This was many years after they had both left Deventer. He had been saying that Arnold's



father was accustomed to transmit annually a handsome sum of money to the Brethren ; and then he continues :—

After the death of his parents he was desirous of giving the inheritance that had come to him, for the common use of the Brethren, but death, coming before this was done, hindered him. For when he purposed to go into Holland to make a disposition of his property, he came as far as Zutphen, to the Brothers of Common Life, who were living there, and having tarried a few days with them, he began after the Feast of St. James and St. Philip, to be so ill that he was obliged to postpone his journey further into the country. And although feeling himself becoming more and more infirm, he did not altogether take to his bed, for it was not until the day sacred to the memory of the Bishop of Wyrone, which was the last day but one of his life, that he laid himself down for the last time on his bed ; and on the morrow, that is the day sacred to the martyr Gengulp, about the hour of Vespers, having settled his affairs, he received the Sacrament of Christ's sacred Body, and was anointed.

But late in the evening, finding himself much debilitated by what he had done, he desired the Brethren to come together to him, to whom he devoutly commended himself that they should faithfully pray for him, and that they would communicate his death to a certain devout Virgin in Schiedam, of the name of Lydewy, whom he had once upon a time visited in that part of Holland ; concerning whose patience many wonderful things are reported, and who had promised that she would pray for him. Having said these things he lay in the full possession of his senses until the tenth hour. When he came to this his last hour he did not manifest any distress, but said that he was ready for his departure ; and then, whilst the Brethren were present and praying for him, he yielded up his spirit at the hour just named, without any great pain, as it seemed. He had lived with the devout Brethren from his youth, for thirty-one years, with a good conscience, having persevered as a true worshipper of God, and as a devoted lover of Christ in the humble position of a Cleric in the Congregation of the Brethren. The death of this sweet and amiable Brother was on May 9, in the City of Zutphen, in the year 1430, just thirty years after Thomas had separated from him on his leaving De-venter. He was buried in the Cemetery of the Blessed Virgin Mary, at the south part of the Church.

It is probable that à Kempis often repeated this, and other short biographies which he wrote of the Brothers of

the Common Life, for the edification of his younger brethren : for at the close of his account about Arnold, as also in one or two other cases, we have a few words related as to what the novice who heard it said, and what the senior Brother replied to him. Thus in this instance the words of the novice are :—‘ When I hear respecting the life of such men I learn to despise my own, because I behold in them how far distant I myself am from many virtues. Nevertheless I hope to improve myself, as I am wholly possessed by what thou hast told me, and thoroughly design to amend my life.’

To which the senior Brother gives answer :—‘ What I would briefly say to you is this, that you should study to attain spiritual fervour, and that you should rejoice to occupy your time in humble exercises ; never aspire to any dignity, or to the honours of office, but labour by every possible means to subjugate thyself, and to extirpate all vice, so that you may be able to please God more fully, who always giveth the especial grace of devotion to humble souls, and after the labours of this present life well spent are over, eternal glory. Amen!’<sup>1</sup>

The other intimate friend and companion of Thomas à Kempis in his early years, and who next to Father Florentius exercised the greatest influence for good in Deventer, was John Cacabus, or as he was otherwise called, John Kessel, Kettel, or Ketel,<sup>2</sup> who was deputed to the office of

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Arnoldi Schoonhoven*, no. II. Tom. tert. pp. 109–113.

<sup>2</sup> In the *Life of John Kettlewell, the Non-juror*, written by Dr. George Hickes and Robert Nelson, Esq., allusion is made to this pious person in these words, ‘ There was one John Ketel, alias Kettel (which is no other than *John Kettlewell* without the termination), in the fifteenth century, a person of most exemplary piety and devotion, whose life was written by that holy man, Thomas à Campis (Kempis), so that the Kessels, and the Ketels of Holland and Flanders, and the Kettlewells of England, are indeed *all originally* but one name and one family, only the termination, which is added to this last, as in many other English names is done, must have been of a *Norman* original, by the corruption of *Ville*, a town or village, into *well*. And the first of his family very probably were so called, from being of such a town or village.’

‘ It is moreover observable, that we are often apt to be mistaken by the seeming affinity of names in their vulgar signification, as was the afore-named

cook ; and who, though wealthy and of a good family, would never take upon himself any higher office than that to which he had been first appointed. From à Kempis we learn that earlier in life he had entered into business as a merchant in Holland and Flanders, and had been very successful. Nevertheless his prosperity did not bring with it contentment ; he was restless, and thought he should be happier, and have things more according to his desire, if he changed to some other mode of life and took up another career. He was therefore minded to leave his business, in the hope, at first, of making a better merchandise in the Church, thinking—as others have done—to make worldly gain by a profession of godliness, and that he might, through interest—since he had friends who could aid him—or by making presents, come without much difficulty to be made a Bishop in some cathedral, or a royal Abbot, and wear rich robes. For so much was his mind taken up with this design that, in order to be prepared beforehand, he had, whilst a layman, provided himself with most costly priestly ornaments and robes, all embroidered with inwrought gold, such as any lord Abbot might wear. He had frequently considered with himself as to what would be the best way to carry his project into execution, and had already taken some steps towards the attainment of it.

But, while he thought on these things, the Spirit of God wrought powerfully on his conscience, and convinced him of the sinfulness of such a course, and of his own sinfulness in general. At length, being inspired with the desire after better things, he resolved to cast aside the deceitful and burdensome servitude of the world, and seek the office of the priesthood in a proper spirit, hoping that he might

writer of the life of John Ketel or Kettlewell, the good man who was no critic turning it in Johannes Cacabus. Whereas, of a truth, *Cassel*, *Kessel*, *Ketel*, and *Kettlewell*, are not properly named from a *kettle*, but from the Latin *Castellum*, a castle ; nor *well* at the end of proper names derived from the English word, as that commonly understood, except very rarely, but from the *Villa* of the *Romans* and the *Ville* of the *French* and *Normans*, as was hinted and exemplified, and might abundantly be confirmed.—Vol. i. p. 2, ed. 1719.

serve God more honestly in that state of life. With this purpose before him he gave up for awhile his pursuit of business, and hearing of the fame of Father Florentius and the devout clerics at Deventer, he went thither at the suggestion of a good man with whom he had had some intercourse, and attended the public school, with certain other persons who were desirous of gaining more learning. During the time, however, whilst endeavouring to obtain some knowledge of Grammar and of the Latin language for the reading and understanding the Holy Scriptures, he had frequent opportunities of observing the holy life and conversation of the pious 'Brothers of Common Life,' and was so affected by what he saw and heard of them, that he was wholly changed into another man. He was now so incited with the great desire to abandon worldly business altogether, that he entirely gave up his interest to others engaged in it, and entered, as à Kempis has it, 'the school of Heavenly exercises,' that he might learn the will of God in the house of Florentius, where many lived together in the service of Christ, being well grounded in humility and established in Divine love.

Previous to his coming to live with the Brethren he sold the precious ornaments which he designed for himself when he should enter the ministry as he had intended, as also the beautiful robes with curious devices in gold—all of which he had prepared beforehand whilst engaged in his worldly affairs—and distributed the proceeds to charitable purposes. He then bought some very plain clothes to wear, including a cap and a tunic or frock, such as are used by cooks, and thus accoutred he presented himself, and petitioned with great urgency that he might serve the Brethren in the kitchen, in order that, so long as he lived among them, he might show forth his grateful submission to God in a humble station. After many solicitations, therefore, he was admitted on probation, and was more delighted with the common garments suitable for the menial work of the kitchen, than the priestly robes wherewith he once thought to deck himself.



And in this lowly condition, continues Thomas, he became a shining light and a most admirable example of humility and obedience to all that were in the House, subjecting himself to perfect mortification of the flesh and spirit for the love of the Crucified. But though he thus humbled himself, the fame of his good conversation got abroad to the ears of strangers ; and many people in high position wondered that he, who was once so rich a merchant, should now become a poor cook and a humble Brother. For he who had purposed for himself at first the dignity of the Ecclesiastical Order, afterwards having given up every worldly distinction, and the pride of any dignity that he might obtain, now sought the lowest place of all, that he might imitate Christ, who did humble Himself by taking upon Himself the form of a servant, that he might minister to his Disciples.

With him the young student—Thomas à Kempis—formed a warm intimacy which quickly grew into a great friendship : he thus speaks of him when he begins to tell the story of his life.

This humble servant of Christ, despising all worldly things, chose the way of holy poverty on earth that he might possess Eternal riches with the saints in Heaven. For through works of mercy and charity, he gained an entrance into perennial felicity. This man, but so lately well known to me when I came to Deventer, exhibited so much humility in his conduct and exemplary behaviour that he preached more ‘on the contempt of worldly things’ by his deeds than by his words. Yet his discourse was not lacking force when he came to speak about God, inasmuch as he persuaded his auditors that they should renounce all worldly grandeur, and that, for the love of Christ, no labour should be abhorred. But who, he asks, can worthily speak of the virtues of this man? Nevertheless love requires me to say a few words, so that this hidden pearl in the Lord’s Vineyard should not any longer lie concealed, but that it should be brought to light for the edification of many.

Many interesting circumstances does Thomas narrate respecting this friend. He mentions how this good Brother was wont to discourse with his companion—probably à Kempis himself—concerning holy poverty and self-abnegation ; and spoke out with such fervour in his words, that he appeared in his outward gesture and by the lighting up of

his countenance, as if he must needs be all in a flame. He rendered the greatest thanks to God that he had been called to this kind of earthly ministration—viz. that of being a cook to the Community, and that he had not been suffered to be lost in attending to so many worldly interests. Therefore he was wont to say to the Brethren with great zest and pleasantness of soul, when he had his white dress on for cooking: ‘Am I not now made a great priest and prelate, since I can administer the Communion twice every day to the Brethren?’ signifying, by this parable, as à Kempis has it, that since he prepared and served dinner and supper for them morning and evening, so he did thereby renew Christ in each of the Brethren, meaning that he was the appointed instrument of providing sustenance for those who were living as the followers of Christ. There is also an evident allusion to his past dreams of vain glory, and how it had in a certain way found fulfilment through his self-abasement, since he had become a true servant of Christ in ministering to them.

Oftentimes, too, says à Kempis, has he been found on his bended knees engaged in prayer near the fire; and when carrying some pot or vessel in his hand he has been heard devoutly singing Psalms. Hence he made the kitchen his oratory, knowing that God was everywhere to be found, and while kneeling near the material fire he became inflamed with spiritual fervour. What he was wont to hear sung in Church, he sweetly ruminated upon, or softly chanted over to himself whilst busily engaged at his work. And thus he had God in his heart whilst he outwardly attended to the duties of the kitchen, and was inwardly free to meditate upon heavenly things, so that no moment was spent unfruitfully by him, and no negligence occurred in his private devotions. He diligently studied to do his best, and seasonably to prepare food for the Brethren, yet he avoided introducing superfluities. And moreover, whilst he distributed the better pieces of food to those he served, he usually reserved the worst to be consumed by himself.

Though he continued as a humble lay-brother to the end of his days, and did not aspire even to be a cleric, yet he seems to have seized every opportunity of drawing the

minds of those who in any wise came near him to the contemplation of holy truths, and to the love of God his Saviour : and this he did not in any formal or dry manner, as if he was but repeating some worn-out formula, but as if it came fresh from his heart, and as if some light had recently dawned upon him. Thus à Kempis tells us that, 'On special holy-days, when certain young clerics from the schools came, he generally introduced something profitable to their notice, as for example, among other things, he said : 'We find it well written in the Holy Scriptures, Blessed are the poor in spirit, since of them is the kingdom of Heaven ; but nowhere do we read, Blessed are the Masters of Arts.' And they, being surprised at the freshness of his words, received them with great respect. He was accustomed to declare his own sentiments to them as, for instance, that knowledge without humility is unprofitable, but that poverty of spirit, that is humility, shall truly gain an entrance into the Kingdom of God. Moreover, 'Humility even now in this life obtains the grace of God, and in the world to come eternal life.'

Thomas à Kempis relates several anecdotes which, though of a simple nature, serve well to illustrate the self-denying, compassionate, patient, and humble-minded character of his pious friend ; how like unto Christ he endeavoured to live. 'He was indeed,' says à Kempis, 'full of compassion towards the suffering poor, and chiefly to those who desired to serve God.' And when certain poor persons said to him that they received but little by begging from door to door, he wondered that so many rich people gave so niggardly, and did not give more largely to the poor, since they could without much detriment to themselves exercise so much compassion, and receive from God the greatest reward. Mention is then made of an experiment which he tried.

Willing, however, to prove what the poor said, he departed late one day—having assumed the habiliments of a poor man, to beg bread, with a companion whom he had selected to go with him. And he went and cried outside at the door of the houses,

‘Give something to a poor stranger for God’s sake.’ Hearing this a certain cleric living in one of the houses rose up quickly to open the door, that he might know who the stranger was. And running after him, he inquired, ‘Who are you that you should beg of us in this manner?’ But he, desiring to remain unknown, held his peace whilst petitioning for food, and merely said, ‘I am——’ Then the other, recognising him from his voice, said, ‘Art thou not John Kettel? Art thou now begging bread?’ When he came to this, John said, ‘Be silent, do not betray me by making a noise about it. It is a good and pious cause.’ And the cleric returning to the house related the circumstance to the household, saying, ‘How strange, how very strange is that which I have seen, John Kettel, the cook at the Brother-house of Florentius, is going from door to door begging bread.’ But they, signing themselves with the sign of the cross, were astonished, saying, ‘What a good man he has shown himself to be.’ And these people, conferring among themselves, were much edified by the example of John, and privately recounted to their friends what had been done. But John, returning to the house of the Brothers with the fragments of the alms he had received, carried them with great gladness into the kitchen, and showed to Florentius and the Brethren the benediction of holy bread which he had besought and obtained for God’s sake. Florentius himself was deeply impressed with the devout lowliness of the cook, and said, ‘John, give us part of your alms;’ who replied, ‘Willingly will I give you some of these things to eat, but then I must provide again for the poor from the food you have, because the poor ought not to lose what belongs to them, but should receive a more ample allowance.’ Then there was given to the Brethren for dinner some of those alms which had been obtained, and John received the whole of the bread that was in the storehouse of the Brothers, to give to the poor for God’s sake, as he had been commissioned to do; and there was great joy in that house.

Another anecdote that à Kempis tells of his friend is this :—

On one occasion he went to draw water from the river near the fish gate; and entering the vessel of a certain fisherman that he might draw the water clean from the river, the man to whom it belonged came upon him and said, ‘What business have you here? Depart at once from the boat.’ Then hearing the words, with incredible patience he omitted to draw the water, and prepared to leave, lest he should further offend the man; but the



fisherman seeing that he was one of the good Brothers, and that he would depart without saying anything, was moved with compassion, and said, 'Come here to me, and I will fill your bucket ;' and drawing the water returned it to him saying, 'Now go in peace.' And having given thanks to his benefactor, Kettel departed, bearing away the water in the bucket, devoutly praying by the way, as he was always accustomed to do when he went out to transact any business.

Moreover Father Florentius knowing him to be a man of courage, and capable of enduring adverse circumstances with a brave heart, reproved him for negligence, at times, imputing a fault to him, when he had not been faulty, wishful to try his patience in this way, and also to show an example of it to others. Thus when certain individuals knocked at the service window of the kitchen, and other persons were at the door of the house, and John (Kettel) hastened to answer each as the necessity of the case required, Father Florentius, coming quickly upon him at this moment, beat with his hand upon the table that he would bring something to him, as if he had some special need for it. He however being a little tardy by reason of his being occupied, the pious Father said sharply to the cook, wishing to prove him, 'How long am I to wait here expecting you?' To this the good cook meekly replied, 'I am here, most kind Father, and will bring you what you please. I beseech you to pardon my slowness.' And when by chance the Brethren complained that they ought not to have the food so badly cooked as it sometimes happened, Florentius would speak to him after this manner, 'Whatever have you seasoned the food like this for? Do you not know how to cook better than this?' To all this he listened patiently, bearing meekly their accusations, and, confessing that he had been negligent, replied, 'I will try to amend myself.' To which Father Florentius would respond, 'You often say this, but you make little advance.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> And let not the behaviour of Florentius towards Kettel be thought churlish, unwise, and reproachable. He was an able guide of souls, and knew the characters of those he had to deal with, and how they might be still further perfected. It was occasionally the custom of the saintly hermits in the desert to try those whom they regarded as strong in faith and resolutely bent on doing God's will under all circumstances. Thus it is recorded that Abbot John, disciple of St. Amon, served one of the ancient fathers in the wilderness, who was extremely infirm, for the period of twelve years ; and during this time he applied himself with all imaginable care and affection to serve him, yet he never received from him one pleasant or thankful word, but on the contrary, was often received very rudely, and treated unkindly by him. At

Whether he was but an indifferent cook, not having thoroughly learnt the business, or whether he at times became absorbed with higher thoughts which carried his attention away for awhile from sublunary things, we know not, but we see how truly meek and humble he had become, when he not only confessed his faults and imperfections, but was willing to be considered more faulty than he really was; and on this account it was that he was set forth before the other Brethren by the Superior as an example of rare humility.

A Kempis tells us that he frequently meditated on the goodness of God; and with eager desire to know more of Jesus Christ, he studied His life from the Holy Gospels, that he might make it the rule of his whole life. And for

length the old man, finding himself near his end, called to him, in the presence of a great many ancient hermits that came to visit him, the holy man who during this space had served him with so much patience and humility; and taking him by the hand he thrice repeated these words: *Remain constant in God's service*; and recommending him to the most venerable fathers present, he said, in order to move them the more, 'Believe it is not a man but an angel I recommend to you; for during the twelve years he has served me in my sickness he has never had a good word from me; and yet he never failed to serve me with all possible diligence and affection.'

Such trials were not to discourage them, but to elevate their religion above the region of mere sense and feeling. There are many in these days that put fervent feelings in the place of faith; and when they are depressed, or things go contrary, or they are left to themselves, their faith becomes weak and is ready to vanish away. But when any one goes on serving God and trusting Him all the more fully in hours of darkness and trial, when there is no voice of encouragement to cheer him, nor the sympathy of friends, or even of religious associates to animate him, when difficulties are thrown in his way, and contentment is thrown upon him, and he still goes on doing his duty faithfully, humbly serving God and hoping in him, the strength of his faith becomes all the more clearly seen, as it was in the case of faithful Abraham when called to slay his son, or that of Job, who in the midst of the many sore afflictions God permitted to come to him, said, 'Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him.' And, on the other hand, it only shows a weak faith in any one, when he is always needing the voice of encouragement, looking for excitement, to have his feelings stirred, and to have all things to go well with him, in order to be earnest in religion; and becomes slack and negligent in his duty, or in serving God, when he has not these; for his faith is like his who received the seed on stony ground, 'the same is he who heareth the Word, and anon with joy receiveth it; yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth awhile; for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the Word, by and by he is offended;' or, as St. Luke has it, 'in time of temptation falls away.'

the love of Him, he cheerfully embraced, as will be seen from the few records that have been given, 'the lowest place, the commonest food, and the poorest raiment.'

He died in the Brother-house about five years after à Kempis had been at Deventer, that is, when à Kempis was nearly nineteen years of age. A few days before his death he was entreated to say, whether there was anything which he considered could be more worthily and fitly done in the House, as the Brethren wished to amend themselves in whatsoever way he was willing to inform them. À Kempis then continues :—

He being a faithful lover of the poor replied, 'In three things I have a desire to see you amend. First, that you should eat more sparingly, and give more to the poor. Secondly, that you sell the better ornaments you have, and give the price of them to the poor. Thirdly, seeing we have many more books than we need, that some should be sold (retaining what are necessary), in order to relieve the poor still more.' On hearing these words, Father Florentius rejoiced at his devotion and compassion, and answered, 'John, what you say is very good.'

Thus his entire thoughts were exercised in loving consideration for the poor, and, like Christ, the burden of his last request was 'give ye them to eat'—he seemed to care little or nothing for the aggrandisement or temporal prosperity of the Society, unless it was that they should become great as followers of Christ, Who, for our sakes, became poor, and was full of compassion. During the period of his sickness certain poor clerics came to visit him. And, says à Kempis :—

On beholding them with eyes of compassion, he exclaimed : 'Oh how dear you are unto me, my poor brethren ; for the rest of my time upon earth I shall not be able to give you anything. I commend you, however, to God, that He may provide for you in all good things.' Among many other exercises of humiliation, it was his custom every Sunday to clothe himself in a long white tunic or shroud-like garment, to remind himself of his death ; and in this he performed the duties of his office as cook. It was his earnest request also that he should be buried in it when he died. The which good office was done for him by his associate in the

kitchen, Matthias de Macklineus, who afterwards washed the vestment, that he might be buried in it as he had desired.

This also adds to his great merit, that before he fell ill, he undertook, out of love and obedience, from the beginning, the care of the poor clerics, and of the infirm, desiring to visit them that he might the more diligently minister to their necessities. But being overtaken with infirmity he was wonderfully comforted by the sweetness of Christ's visit to him.

Oh never let the voice of calumny be raised against these humble men of heart—these little ones of Christ, who love Him with so full a heart that they delight to seek his presence continually in prayer, and holy meditation, and who strive to imitate Him—that theirs is a selfish religion, that they care not for others, so they themselves alone may enjoy religion and be saved at the last. Though they may not individually talk about their good deeds, being full of true humility and the grace of God, they nevertheless feel it to be a privilege to do ought for others in Christ's stead, and consequently abound in good works, in deeds of love and kindness. They who busy themselves with many outward works of charity, and engage heartily, it may be, in some 'philanthropic cause,' without active love to Christ, without being at one with Him, without seeking His presence and spending time with Him—are wanting in the very essence and stamina of Christian Charity, they are wanting root to live on; and it would be well if they seriously examined their hearts to see if there be not some selfish motive—some inducement that has self in view, such as the desire to be thought well of by their fellow-creatures, and the acquiring influence over others, a restlessness of mind, which by doing something for others, satisfies for a time and quiets it. Good works are in themselves ever to be commended, but God looks at the heart, and sees why we do them. And those persons are most pleasing to Him who, out of pure love to Jesus our Lord, are sweetly constrained for His sake to succour all that are in distress, in need, sickness, or any other adversity, as far as they can, and say nothing about it themselves. For is



it not the peculiar character and excellency of Christian charity to feel, when we have done all that it is in our power to do, that we are still unprofitable servants, and consequently should greatly shrink from making our charitable actions known?

In John Ketel we have an instance how the Brothers of Common Life imbibed the Spirit of Gerard the Great, their founder, in the exercise of Divine love. And what Thomas à Kempis says of the latter may well apply to the former, and more or less to à Kempis himself, and many other of these Brethren. The words are characteristic of members of this religious Society generally, though they are spoken relative to Gerard. 'He studied to relieve the necessities of the indigent through his own means and that of others. . . . Behold then a true Israelite, *who so loved God, that he did not neglect his neighbour, and so raised his affections towards heavenly things, as not to be unmindful of the necessities of others; yea, he busied himself not only in attending to his own salvation, but in seeking the profit of many, and leading them with himself to great perfection.*'<sup>1</sup>

'The merciful God bestowed upon him great grace, which he did not receive in vain, but employed in the performance of every good work. . . . Having obtained great compassion from the Lord, he studied to impart this to his neighbour largely, and everywhere, in true charity, so that he could deservedly say with David: "I have brought forth fruit as an Olive tree in the House of God; and my hope is in the mercy of God for ever and ever . . . ." Nor did he as that wicked servant, named in the Gospel, go and hide his Lord's money, intent upon his own advantage, but faithfully put out to interest the gift of knowledge, and the talent delivered to him for gaining souls. Worthily, therefore, is he compared to a fertile Olive tree, who obtained the oil of compassion which he poured forth by pious expenditure among his neighbours. Yet chiefly did he manifest the bowels of compassion towards the poor clerics, to desolate widows, to chaste virgins, bestowing

<sup>1</sup> *Vita Gerardi Magni*, cap. viii.

upon them, and upon every one who needed the aid of consolation, the care of paternal solicitude.’<sup>1</sup>

To return, however, more immediately to John Ketel, in narrating the singular event that follows, à Kempis has evidently in his mind this thought, that as his friend in health and strength had assisted the poor in their necessities and visited the sick, as if he had seen Christ in them, so Christ did now wonderfully condescend to acknowledge him in return with a peculiar favour whilst yet he tarried on earth. The circumstance is thus related by Thomas :—

Master Amilius, who diligently attended to him in his illness, and continually waited upon him, bringing him what he needed, came to visit him very early one morning on a certain day, and asked him if he wished for anything, for by his permission he would go to the Church, that he might hear Mass. This done, he returned to his sick friend, when John said to him, ‘It will please me that you share the Mass with me, that thou hast heard.’ Amilius answered, ‘Willingly would I share and give the whole to thee in love, beloved Brother.’ To which John said, ‘My Brother, our Lord Jesus Christ has thought worthy to visit me, whilst thou hast been absent.’ Then Amilius hearing this, said, ‘When did He depart, I beseech thee?’ He replied, ‘Immediately when thou hadst opened the door He departed.’ Then Amilius rejoiced greatly, and rendering thanks, he blessed God. ‘And these things,’ adds à Kempis, ‘he afterwards narrated to me.’

The story of this vision is thus briefly told. Like the writers of the Bible, à Kempis simply mentions the circumstance, without entering into particulars, or affording any explanation. There is evidently something supernatural in it. Whether our Lord graciously vouchsafed to reveal Himself in bodily form, in some mysterious manner to Ketel, or a strong impression was made upon his mind with such vividness that Christ seemed really to appear to him, we are unable to determine. There are things in the spiritual life which we cannot doubt, but which nevertheless we cannot comprehend. They are beyond our capacities of fathoming. In his weak state of body and when the spirit was ready to take flight, whilst bordering on the con-

<sup>1</sup> *Vita Gerardi Magni*, cap. xiv.

finer of the invisible world, some special favour may have been granted to one who so thoroughly gave himself to Christ and endeavoured to fashion his life by His ; or the spirit may have beheld what the bodily senses in a grosser state could not do. But be this as it may, it mattered little to Ketel, he was clearly under the impression that the Lord Jesus had come to visit him for a brief moment, and this contented him : nay, it was doubtless a great comfort to the soul of this devout and faithful servant of Christ, when about to end his days, and did so greatly rejoice his heart that with aged Simeon he would be ready to exclaim, ' Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word. For mine eyes have seen Thy salvation.' And it was not long after this, as we learn, that he was called hence.

This servant of God, John the cook, being replete with many fruits of virtue—the account is continued almost in the words of à Kempis—now felt that the time of his departure out of this life drew nigh. He became seriously ill after the octave of Pentecost, being smitten with a virulent swelling of the body, and disposed himself accordingly to meet his end. During this time Satan seems to have tempted him much, trying to deceive or terrify this servant of God, suggesting doubts of his acceptance with God, or that he would ever get to Heaven ; but John's trust was not on himself but on the mercy of God.

The kind Brother above named states that after this, Ketel turned himself more intently to prayer, and among other things to chanting the psalms, musing especially upon the word, ' The Lord looseth them that are bound ; the Lord giveth sight to the blind.' And as his friend sat by his bed-side, he endeavoured to catch more of his words, that he might treasure them up as a memorial, but the hoarseness of his voice prevented him from hearing what was said. He suffered greatly for a long while ; and was much reduced in strength as death approached ; but at last, in the year 1398, on the fourth Sunday after Pentecost, having been brought to a blessed end in the service of

Christ, he breathed forth the spirit of life, amid the prayers of the Brethren who had assembled round him. His loss was much lamented by all who knew him. He was buried in the cemetery at St. Lebuin, where many also of the Brethren who died in the faith of Christ after him rest in peace, to be restored to life through Christ, with all the faithful at the last day. Glory and praise be unto Christ, for such a devout man and humble cook, who, in a brief course of years, and with a little labour, has had allotted to him (as we piously believe) the highest reward in Heaven. Concerning him the venerable Father Master Huesden, Prior of Windesheim, bore this excellent testimony, saying, 'Would to God that He would enable me to become a like man, and to die in a like state as he had done.'<sup>1</sup>

It was from this devout Brother that Thomas learnt the manner of many religious exercises, and obtained from him, notwithstanding his great secrecy and humility, a copy of the same, which he has preserved and subjoined to the narrative of his life, the which is prefaced, *Incipit devotum exercitium ejusdem fratris Joannis*. And it is evident, from the similarity which there is in it to the *Libellus Spiritualis Exercitii* of Thomas à Kempis, that the latter largely adopted, and inculcated the sentiments and counsels contained in it. This much then in conclusion is certain, that there was always a sweet harmony in the sentiments, maxims, and exercises of these two friends, whereby it is believed that they did much to mutually strengthen and edify each other.

Such are some of the memorials which Thomas treasured up and recorded respecting his two chief friends while at Deventer, namely John Kettel and Arnold Schoonhoven, and they have been here given more fully in this life of Thomas à Kempis, because, if there is any truth in the proverb 'that a man is best known by his friends and the company that he keeps'—and the general acceptance of it shows that there is—we gain, in the absence of many par-

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Joannis Cacabii, vulgo Ketel*, No. 10, tom. tert. pp. 99-108.



ticulars about à Kempis himself, a pretty good idea of his character—what he was in himself, and what he strove to be.

It was impossible for Thomas à Kempis to keep up an intimate acquaintance and to be so closely associated with them—coming into daily and almost hourly contact with them—without being greatly incited by their example to renewed endeavours after the heavenly life, and to become assimilated to them, following and imitating them in many ways, as they tried to walk closely in the foot-prints of our Adorable Redeemer, along the narrow way of life. À Kempis found much keen enjoyment in their society, and he felt also that he was thereby being raised to live at a higher level, even a heavenly life on earth. This holy fellowship gave a sweet savour to the otherwise severe life they led, and made the healthy watchfulness, restraint, self-denial and self-discipline, acceptable and vigorous. This genial companionship with souls of a like mind was not a hindrance to his attainment of a most devoted life to God his Saviour, but rather on the contrary, it was good for him to be with such, and he felt it to be so, as they stimulated him to greater endeavours after holiness of life. It was, moreover, undoubtedly a great safeguard for him—as it is even for those who have to mix much with the world—against temptations of various kinds : it kept him from falling into a morbid consciousness of himself, or into a self-righteous condition, and such like dangers, to which some religious persons are subject ; the more so when they have no kindred souls to whom they can unbosom their thoughts, or with whom they can hold sweet communion on their mutual interests in sacred things.

Thomas à Kempis was well aware, as it is evident from his writings, that not every kind of companionship was good.<sup>1</sup> It was a power, an influence that might lead to evil, to very

<sup>1</sup> See *De recognitione propriæ Fragilitatis*, chapter iii., 'On a faithful and true Friend,' where these words occur—'Esto bonus et fidelis, et invenies amicum fidelem. Amor Dei, amicum fidelem constituit : sine Deo nulla amicitia stabit.'

great evil, as well as to what was good ; and therefore it behoved everyone to be very careful with whom he associated, lest he should be drawn from his high purpose, and dragged down to a lower kind of life. Hence he says : ' Open not thine heart to every man, but treat of thy affairs with the wise and such as fear God.' In the earthly attachments which earnest-minded Christians make they must guard their hearts, lest they be too much taken up with them, deprived of that interior spirit which they need, and drawn away in any degree from God ; lest they trust, and seek their happiness in their friends, rather than in God and in His favour. But still more must they be on their guard against suffering themselves to be led away through earthly attachments to an easy indifference about the soul's welfare—to a neglect of the things of God, and a careless relaxation of watchfulness and self-denial, whereby the whole tone of a man's being is made worse, and rendered a more easy prey to the crafts and assaults of the evil one. Otherwise à Kempis was fully assured of the great advantage to be derived from associating with high-minded Christian souls, resolute in the pursuit of attaining to the stature of perfect men in Christ. It was like living in a purer and holier atmosphere ; it had a bracing and refreshing influence upon his own soul ; it seemed to lift him to a more blessed state of existence even whilst on earth ; it kindled in him an ardent desire to press forward with them in the attainment of all heavenly graces, to become like them true lovers and followers of Christ.

À Kempis was early separated from both these dear friends of his : one was taken from him, as we have seen, by death, and he left the other behind at Deventer when he went to Mount St. Agnes, and probably he felt that he would never again on earth meet with their like ; but this did not prevent him from making fresh friendships in after life, perhaps not so close or having such an influence over him, as those we have named : yet he ever seems to have felt it good to cultivate and cherish by all possible means godly companionship ; and therefore we shall find that he

was ever associating himself intimately, not merely as one of a community, with good men, but making friends often with the simple-minded, with such as had even some infirmity of mind or body, and also with younger men who sought his instruction and advice, with all, indeed, in whom he saw the dawning and growth of grace. In short, it might be said of him, as in the words of the Psalmist, 'His delight was with the saints that are in the earth, and upon such as excel in virtue.'

## CHAPTER XI.

A Memoir by à Kempis of Gerard of Zutphen, the Scripturarius—Remarkable for his learning and love of the Bible—His intense zeal for study led him to neglect his bodily wants—His kindness to poor Clerks and to those seeking religious instruction—Cut off in the prime of life—He strongly advocates the utility of reading the Bible in the mother-tongue—Also that prayers should be made in the same—Some extracts from his treatises on these subjects—Also his defence of the mode of life adopted by the Brothers of Common Life—Memoirs of two priests (1), John Gronde, whom Gerard the Great induced to come to Deventer to help him—A celebrated preacher and a great comfort to very many—After Gerard's death he took the spiritual charge of the Sisters—(2), John Brinckerinck, who succeeded Gronde as a preacher and confessor to the Sisters—He had been associated with Gerard in his evangelising labours—À Kempis often heard him, and gives some account of his preaching on several occasions—His many labours of love, and his death.

IT is very instructive and interesting to mark the various means by which the Providence of God fitted and trained His servant Thomas à Kempis for the special work he had to accomplish. We have seen how he was early nurtured in religion by pious and humble parents, and trained up in all virtuous and godly living whilst at Kempen; how he was blessed with a devout and affectionate brother; and how just at the time of life when the mind begins to develop itself and take shape, he was brought into the society of truly godly men, and associated with a few earnest souls when he came to Deventer. We have already mentioned two besides his spiritual Father, Florentius, who exercised no inconsiderable influence upon him, Arnold of Schoonhoven and John Ketel; but there were others besides who in no little degree contributed to advance his spiritual education. Among these we must here notice and give an account of Gerard Zerbolt,



who acquired some renown as one of the Brethren of Deventer. Thomas à Kempis speaks in loving remembrance of him, designating him Gerard de Zutphen, because he was born at this place, in the year 1367. He was the *Scripturarius*, who directed the work of the clerics, and the Librarian who took charge of the manuscripts and books of the Brotherhood; and such was his earnest zeal to know the revealed will of God, that it may truly be said of him in the language of Job, that 'he esteemed the words of His mouth more than his necessary food.'

À Kempis thus writes of him:—

It is a pleasing duty for me to trace out in a few words the virtues of so godly and learned a man as Gerard de Zutphen, and to propose for a good memorial of life his example and writings, that they may be copied by future generations. He deserves especially to be named as one of the first of the Brethren (that joined the community), and as one of the most ardent lovers of the Divine law. For though he lived but a short time, he yet bequeathed to us the most acceptable monuments of doctrine, since he was remarkable for his diligence in the study of the Holy Scriptures, drawing forth also from deep and recondite sentences of the Fathers, various species of aromatic learning, against the distempers of vice, and for the guarding of the soul against lassitude, as are to be found chiefly set forth in the books written by him, one of which begins with *Homo quidam*, and the other, *Beatus vir*.<sup>1</sup>

Like à Kempis he had obtained the rudiments of learning elsewhere, and had come to complete his education at the celebrated school of Deventer, where he soon came under the influence of Florentius, and before long wholly attached himself to him and the Brethren. In his youth, whilst still a boy, he had shown great eagerness for learning, and thirsted for the acquisition of knowledge. He hung upon the lips of his teachers, always imagined the hours of the lessons too short, and deplored nothing so much as when they were discontinued. His intense

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Ger. Zutph.*, sec. 1. The seventh biography of the Brethren.

passion for study was kept vigorously alive through the few years of his after life, and the associating with holy men gave it the direction towards sacred things, which he resolved to pursue with untiring energy.<sup>1</sup>

His eager zeal for learning, combined with his almost complete subjugation and forgetfulness of self, was something remarkable, and at times amounted—to say the least of it—to imprudence, and called for the interference of his superior.<sup>2</sup> Incessantly occupied with reading, studying, and transcribing the Bible and other religious books, he spent the entire day, except the intervals devoted to religious exercises and meals, in his cell, finding his solace in sacred books and pious research, and even in the finest weather would scarcely ever approach the window to breathe the fresh air. He seemed wholly raised above external things, and even to some extent above the necessities of the flesh. He would pass through the streets to the Church as if unconscious of the presence of men; and when interrogated about this abstraction of mind, and whether he were hindered by people passing, he would give an answer implying that outwardly, as regarded their persons and business, they were no more to him than a flock of sheep. Moreover, he seemed not to care what he had to eat, or when the hours of refection came: and when necessity compelled him to take food, he would rather listen to some sacred discourse than be in any haste to refresh his body. Unless, therefore, Father Florentius—who dearly loved him as a faithful Brother in the Lord—had carefully watched over him and been solicitous of his necessities, his health would have been injured more than it was, and his life earlier cut short. Thus it happened, as à Kempis tells us, on one occasion that he had upon him a hidden disease, which medical men call the fistula, but he was so unwilling to give any one the trouble to attend upon him, or that the House should be at any expense, that he patiently bore the pains of his body for the good of his soul. But when this came to the knowledge

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Gerardi Zutph.*, sec. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* sec. 3, 4.

of Florentius he immediately looked after him, had a physician called in—probably the good priest Everard Eza from St. Almelo, who so kindly visited Thomas à Kempis in his illness—who attended him till he was cured and restored to health again.<sup>1</sup>

Such souls as these are precious to the Church; they are the salt of the earth, and ought to be especially cared for. For when rightly directed, and their temporal welfare somewhat looked after, they largely promote the glory of God on earth, and the benefit of many souls around them. In the holy enthusiasm that animates them there seems an utter disregard of self, and its needful requirements, if so be they may accomplish the work they have to do. There are many well able and ever ready to look after their own worldly interests, but these, who are counted fools by the world, are ready and willing to endure all things and even to neglect their necessary wants.

Well and happy is it for them and for the Church, when there is some loving hand, be it wife, or friend, or spiritual director, who will look after them, care for them, and gently restrain or regulate their too ardent zeal or asceticism, that they may be preserved in health, and from injuring themselves, as it is too often done in ignorance, or over great self-abnegation, if not from imbibing a morbid or distorted view of the Christian life.

But with all his forgetfulness or neglect of self, and his abstraction from worldly matters, Gerard of Zutphen was far from being inexperienced in temporal affairs; for he possessed great insight about them, and a sound judgment on questions of law; so that Florentius, in settling matters connected with the business of the Brotherhood, would frequently ask his advice, and engage his services, especially in those things which required a knowledge of the law. Many other persons—those in high position as well as clerics—consulted him in any case of doubt, or when they wanted his opinion on some weighty and difficult business, and listened reverently to him: for in solving any spiritual

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Gerardi Zutph., sec. 4.*

question, when he delivered his sentiments, he usually confirmed them by the authority of the Saints whose teaching or example he wholly followed. On this account he was much extolled by wise and learned men, but he himself still remained humble, and accounted the praise of men for very little, for as à Kempis adds, he did not study to be accounted a professor of elocution, but the maintainer of a good conscience.<sup>1</sup>

He was very helpful to many clerics also, who were strangers, or did not belong to the Brotherhood, lending them sacred books (*sacros codices*) that they might study them in their own homes, and read them in the schools. He admonished them—and particularly those engaged in the study of divinity—not to yield to a life of ease, or to saunter about at feast-times. He had quite an extraordinary fondness for good books, and pointing to portions, or to separate books, of the Holy Scriptures, he would say, ‘These books preach to you and teach you more than we can possibly tell you. For these sacred writings are the light and solace of our minds—the true elixir of life—so that we can no more do without them in our earthly pilgrimage than we can do without the Sacraments of the Church.’ From this we learn, as à Kempis remarks, that he loved the books of sacred theology above the riches of the world, and rejoiced more in a good book than in a rich dinner and the most highly flavoured wines; for he knew that they were not wise who delighted themselves in delicacies to eat and drink; whereas, on the other hand, they who gave themselves up to sacred studies were replenished with wisdom, and worthy of being admitted to heavenly secrets. Therefore, no wonder that he held books in great respect, read them very attentively, and took care of them as if they were treasures of great value to him.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, à Kempis tells us, that he looked not so much to the lengthened exercise of study for the right understanding of the Scriptures, as to the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, Who giveth understanding to the lowly, and revealeth His mysteries to the pure in heart. To the pursuit of this

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Gerardi Zutph.*, sec. 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* sec. 5. It was probably to check this passion for books, which appeared immoderate and hurtful to some of the more practical of the Brotherhood, that John Kettel, the cook, recommended the Brethren when he was dying to keep only what was needful, and to sell the rest for the benefit of the poor.



purity he directed all his energies—stirring up the fear of God in the newly converted, chiding the sluggish, and exhorting those who desired to excel in virtue, to the mortification of all vice within them. ‘If,’ said he, ‘we neglect to fight against vice, evil passions will prevail, and we shall fall into the snares of the devil, who is always lying in wait for us. Therefore labouring with all diligence we must manfully repulse him, since the crown of eternal life is promised to those who conquer.’ After that then, having been illuminated with wisdom from on high, this worthy Priest conversed humbly and devoutly among the Brethren with much grace, which greatly tended to their advancement in holiness of life. And when he had diligently read through many books, he began, before the end of his life, as if converted anew, to read a second time the ‘*Speculum Monachorum*,’ and the ‘*Profectus Religiosorum*,’ by which he endeavoured to resuscitate within him the spirit of devotion, and incite himself to primitive fervour.

There seems to have been a cause for this. A fresh call from God had been given; a warning voice to be ready for his summons hence; and he appears to have plumed the wings of his soul anew for his flight to a better world. Many deaths had taken place around him; some from the very house where he dwelt had been carried off to their last resting place; his own dear friend Lubert Berner was among the number—for loss of whom he mourned deeply.

For, continues Thomas à Kempis, being inflamed with zeal he did not long survive such proficiency, but mindful of the decease of Lubert, whom he loved most dearly, and at whose death he shed so many tears, he followed him in a brief space of time. It happened on this wise—he had been sent with a Brother in the same house, Amilius van Buren, to see the Abbott of Dickeninghe, an accomplished Canonist, with whom he was oftentimes accustomed to discuss cases of law and conscience, and was on his return to Deventer, when coming to the Brother-house at Windesheim, where he designed to stay all night, he became sick unto death. Amilius following the custom of the Brethren, to speak unreservedly to each other, said to him, ‘It seems to me that your sickness will speedily end in death.’ To which Gerard replied, ‘It seems so to me also.’ He rapidly grew worse; there appeared no hope of checking the disease; his time had come;

and he breathed his last as if he had fallen into a sweet sleep, on the night of the Festival of St. Barbara, A.D. 1398, in the thirty-first year of his age. His body was buried with honour by the Prior and the Brethren, in the passage before the door of the Church. Florentius hearing of his death, was greatly distressed, having accounted him as his beloved friend—and both he and the Brethren (among whom Thomas à Kempis was now reckoned), bewailed him with great lamentation, being constrained thereto by their great love for him, because, adds à Kempis, this dear Brother, that had been taken from them, was as a pillar of the house, and a right hand in matters of business. But blessed be God, Who hath granted to us such a man !

À Kempis had now been about five years at Deventer when the Brotherhood sustained the loss of this excellent and zealous servant of God. Immoderate study, and neglect of the body, it is feared, brought on his premature death ; and when sickness came upon him, he had no bodily stamina to resist its inroad, and quickly succumbed. À Kempis, however, had not failed to profit much by having been brought into close contact with such a man ; he was of an age, and in a condition of mind to be deeply affected by the views and sentiments of one so much venerated in the house where he lived ; he had frequent opportunities of listening to his conversations in private, as well as giving earnest attention to his more public and set discourses on religious matters ; and he could not omit to observe diligently his habits and manner of life. There were some points on which this man was at variance with the received opinions then in the Church, points which nevertheless afterwards formed the basis of the Reformation, and by some were judged to be heretical ; it will not therefore be out of place here to advert briefly to a few matters in the writings of this man, since both the life and works of à Kempis were tinged by them, as any one will not fail to observe who attentively studies the books he composed.

The Bible had been for some time, as it is well known, translated from the original Hebrew and Greek tongues into the Latin language ; and this translation was then in

general use among the churches of the West. It was, however, in many of the nations of Europe but as a foreign tongue, a language not understood by the people, and none but the learned could read and comprehend it; and it was doubtless part of the duty of those men who were ordained to be ministers of the Word to interpret or translate the Bible to the unlearned, as well as to expound or preach upon it. It was a most desirable thing, however, that the people of the various countries might have a translation of the Bible in their own tongue, that they might read it for themselves, and not be solely dependent upon others for receiving the Word of God. It was a right they might justly regard as their due, which should not be withheld from them. But many of the leading Ecclesiastics, and foremost Theologians, among whom we find Gerson, the Chancellor of the University of Paris, were opposed to this grand work. They advocated the withholding of the Bible from the laity, fearing they would make a wrong use of it, apprehending that it would give rise to mistakes, superficial knowledge, and unreasonable contradictions of the doctrines of the Church; and did not reflect that these disadvantages, which are certainly of possible occurrence, are more than counterbalanced by manifold beneficial effects.<sup>1</sup>

Now Gerard of Zutphen was one of those who contended most warmly for the translation of the Bible into the German tongue, and at this time he almost stood alone save and except the Brothers with whom he lived, in pleading for the people that they might *read the Word of God in their mother-tongue*. Another matter which he also took up most warmly, akin to this, was that the people should be suffered *to pray in their own tongue*. All the prayers of the Church were at that time also offered up in Latin, so that, though the unlearned might to some extent catch the meaning of what was said, and might endeavour to lift up their hearts to God, in the words uttered, yet could they not be edified as they should be, while praying in an unknown tongue. Now on both these subjects, Gerard of

<sup>1</sup> *Du Pin*, tom. i. pars i. p. 105, and tom. iv. p. ii. p. 623.

Zutphen has written treatises, which are remarkable, considering the time when they were penned, and are well deserving even at this day of a thoughtful attention. He seemed to perceive intuitively that the withholding of these two blessed privileges from the people was a denying to them a knowledge of the Gospel, and a barrier to the progress of true religion; and besides, his reading of the Fathers, and his converse with practical men, deeply earnest themselves, had rendered him doubtless very sensible of their importance, so that he was very eloquent, and pleaded hard and convincingly that both the Bible might be read, and the Prayers of the Church might be said, in a language the people understood.

We learn from two works of his on these subjects, that some of the most vital principles of the Reformation were held and advocated in the Church by the Brothers of Common Life—years before the great change came, by men who, though anxious to preserve the unity of the Church, were thoroughly imbued with a desire to restore to her primitive light, life, and purity; for these treatises appeared full nigh a hundred and forty years before Luther posted up his theses on the door of All Saints Church at Wittemberg. The great German Reformer appeared at a crisis which had long been ripening, and took the lead in a movement which had its origin further back, and was to be traced up to the labours of those who had prepared the way for it in years gone by. Few things probably conduced more to the bringing about of the Reformation than the further promotion of these two measures, which Gerard of Zutphen so ably and so fearlessly advocated. And if credit be given to those who took an active part in the struggle for the Reformation, let not those who prepared the way, and sowed the seed for such a harvest, be forgotten or overlooked. We would call attention to the amount of intelligence, honesty, zeal, and common sense, that are to be found in these writings of Gerard of Zutphen, which ought to raise him in our estimation, when compared with his contemporaries.



In the following passages, it should be borne in mind also that the views and sentiments therein fully expressed, were those in the main held by Thomas à Kempis and the 'Brothers of Common Life.' They form, as it were, a manifesto of the faith, or principles of the Society respecting the points in question, and were traditionally accepted as those held by the Brotherhood.

In a treatise of his *Upon the utility of reading the Bible in the mother-tongue*, Gerard insists, on the one hand, that all laymen should instruct and edify themselves out of the Scriptures, and, on the other hand, no less earnestly warns them against religious curiosity, and the unhealthy inclination to dwell by preference upon those parts of Scripture which are dark and mysterious.<sup>1</sup>

There is in the Scriptures, he says, a sound and simple doctrine accessible to all ; for the comprehension of which no deep search or disputation is necessary, but which, on the contrary, is evident of itself to every reader without great pains, or learned controversy. On the other hand, Scripture also contains another doctrine, sublime, profound, and obscure, for understanding which diligent inquiry and more penetrating research are requisite. The first of these doctrines may be called milk, drink, or water ; the second, strong food or bread.

Now for simple and unlettered people, or laymen, who are in a manner children in knowledge, it is necessary, and in no wise forbidden or disallowed, but rather recommended by holy men, that they should either themselves read, or hear read by others, in the language they understand, these books of Scripture which contain the simple and obvious doctrine. On the other hand, it is not advan-

<sup>1</sup> For this summary of Gerhard Zerbolt's teaching and sentiments I am mainly indebted to Ullmann, who says that he has drawn the chief points of it from a book composed by Gerard, entitled, *De Libris Teutonicalibus*, an excerpt from which 'De Utilitate lectionis sacrarum literarum in lingua vulgari' is given in *Daventria Illust.*, pp. 41-55. And he adds that, though Zerbolt gives fifteen reasons, he does not give them all, nor the order in which they are introduced by him. He only selects what seems the most important, and gives them in what appears to him an appropriate order. And he states that the Latin in which the works are written is of great purity.

tageous for such persons to occupy themselves much with those books of Scripture, or those holy teachings which contain the doctrine we have above designated as deep, difficult, and obscure, whether the books are published and translated into the vulgar, or into some other tongue.

That the reading of the Scriptures in the vulgar tongue is not absolutely unlawful for laymen, but rather beneficial and necessary, appears from these words: 'Sacred Scripture,' says Gerard de Zutphen, 'does not merely train and instruct a particular class, but every man in his own station. For sometimes it prescribes to all men general rules of faith and practice. In other and most places, it addresses its doctrine to some one particular class. Here it teaches beginners, there informs the more advanced, and anon moulds the life of the perfect, thus adapting itself to the moral condition of all. Accordingly, Scripture has been given to all men in all ranks, and given for this end, that they who have as it were become fugitives from themselves, and strangers to their own hearts, and were not able inwardly to discover their sins, might at least learn to discover them outwardly, by means of the picture which the Scripture holds up. What sensible man, then, will dare to say that the laity sin when they use the Scriptures for the purpose which God gave it to subserve, viz., teaching them to discover, and heartily to repent of, and forsake their sins? Why should they not be partakers of the divine law, as well as of the other common blessings of God, seeing that among these the law and the Holy Scriptures, as peculiar in their kind, occupy the chief place? The laity, therefore, cannot with justice be excluded from this benefit and divine consolation, which impart life and nourishment to the soul.'

Gerard of Zutphen contends that it is in general the grand object of Scripture to give strength and support to the operation of the natural law, in order that man may be enabled, by an outward help, to see and discover what he never could have seen by the darkened and defective light of the law of nature within him. This is the case with all

men, but more particularly with laymen, inasmuch as they are perpetually entangled with worldly business and cares, by which their inward eye, or power of discrimination and understanding—which is the law of nature within them—is overspread with dust. Accordingly, it is expedient for them, above all men, at certain times to rest from business, to enter into themselves, and, in the mirror of the Divine Word, contemplate what they are. The laity are even bound by law at certain times to attend church in order to hear the Word of God. But if they ought not to know the Holy Scripture, why is it preached to them? And why may they not be permitted to read the same things, or almost the same things, as those to which they are called upon to listen?

It is too true, continues Gerard, that laymen learn and retain but little of what they hear, and seldom understand what they listen to during the quarter of an hour, or the less time that the sermon lasts.<sup>1</sup> If, without being forbidden, or even blamed, they peruse secular books and poems, frequently most obscene and seductive, and occupy their minds with useless things, such as the Trojan war, and the fair Diana, it would be the highest absurdity to restrain them from the Bible, which might kindle in them love to God, and a longing for the heavenly country. Besides, the greatest teachers of the Church, Jerome, Augustine, Gregory, and Chrysostom, have always exhorted the laity to study the Holy Scriptures, which they would never have done, had they considered it injurious or unlawful. And that laymen should read it in the mother tongue is involved in the nature of the case. Originally the whole Bible was written in the language in which it could be best understood by those for whom it was designed, and in general by all; to wit, the Old Testament in Hebrew for the Jews,

<sup>1</sup> Though we have instances of sermons at this time occupying a much longer space of time, they were doubtless delivered on special occasions. From the words of Gerard it is evident that, in general, those addressed to the common people in their mother-tongue were of short duration. It was not thought wise to keep them a long time, but to speak to them a few words and let them go.

the New Testament in Greek, with the exception of the Gospel of St. Matthew, and the Epistle to the Hebrews, which were in Hebrew, and according to some that also to the Romans, which is said to have been in Latin.<sup>1</sup> If, then, it be not lawful to read the Bible in the vulgar tongue, why should that have been the tongue in which the Apostles and Prophets wrote? And why did not Paul and Matthew rather address the Jews in Greek, Latin, or some other language not familiar to them, and the Greeks in Hebrew?

Besides, from the earliest times translations of the Bible have been made into the languages of various countries, either by eminent Fathers of the Church themselves, or at least with their approbation, and especially into the Latin, the use of which extended over the whole world. According to Cassian, the Egyptian monks studied the Bible day and night, and yet they were unacquainted with either Greek or Latin. They must, therefore, have read it in the Egyptian or some cognate tongue. The Jews have the Scriptures in Hebrew, the Chaldeans in Chaldee, the Grecians in Greek, the Arabians in Arabic, the Syrians in Syriac, the Goths in Gothic; the Egyptians, Indians, Russians, Sclavonians, Gauls, in fact all nations, possess the Bible in their own language. If, then, the Bible be read in all languages under the sun, why should it not be read in German, as well as in Arabic and Sclavonian?

<sup>1</sup> In a note on this point Ullmann says, 'Zerbolt's critical knowledge must of course be estimated only by the standard of his age . . . That St. Matthew's gospel was first written in Hebrew has been acknowledged, although not with unanimous consent, by modern criticism itself. In the case of the Epistle to the Hebrews, this idea has been rejected upon quite sufficient ground, and in that of the Epistle to the Romans still more decidedly. The same may also be said of the supposed Latin original of the Gospel of St. Mark, of which also Zerbolt subsequently takes notice. The opinion he expresses respecting the relation of the *vulgate* to the *original text* of the Bible is well deserving of attention. One might almost suppose that in the exercise of prophetic foresight, he had respect to the fourth session of the Council of Trent, for he says expressly:—"The Holy Scriptures are *much more authentic* in the Hebrew and Greek than in the Latin language. For the Latin version is always to be rectified and improved from the Hebrew and Greek text, when any ambiguity in the language occurs."—*Daventr. Illustr* p. 53.



Thus closely does Zerbolt argue this momentous question, and continues :—

‘Reading the Bible can never be unlawful, for otherwise it would either be bad in itself, or must have been positively forbidden. But neither of these is the case. Reading the Scriptures cannot be bad in itself, for it is a principal means of aiding a man in doing good, and in overcoming evil. And just as little has it been forbidden, because neither divinity nor law contain any actual prohibition against the practice, but everywhere recommend it. In place, then, of hindering laymen from reading good German books and the German Bible, they should rather be encouraged to do so, for it would be far more beneficial were they to occupy their time with these, than with useless fables and tales, or with drinking in taverns.’

So much then for what Zerbolt says with regard to reading the Bible in the mother tongue.

And now to take up the other matter ; it was to be expected that Zerbolt would express himself in a similar way upon the kindred subject of *prayer in the mother tongue*. Even in those days, and long before the invention of printing, the laity had manuscript prayer-books, which at certain times they were accustomed to use ; and the question arose whether they should read their prayers and psalms in the mother tongue, or, according to the then universal practice of the Church, in Latin. Here also Zerbolt, naturally founding his opinion upon several declarations of the apostle St. Paul, 1 Cor. xiv., decides on the principle that what is intelligible conduces most to edification and profit, and among other observations has the following : ‘There are in prayer four kinds of attention or application of mind. First, the superficial, directed to the mere sound of the words, and by which the inward sense receives but little nourishment. Next, attention to the meaning of the words, by which the soul may receive nourishment, provided the prayer is in some degree devotional. Further, there is a spiritual attention, if, from the words of the prayer a spiritual sense is derived ; and, in short, a fourth

sort, when a man turns his mind to God, and the object for which he prays. Of these kinds of attention, the first may be exercised by the layman, even when he prays in Latin, and so likewise may the fourth, although not with the same certainty. The second and third kinds, however, which are of the greatest utility, are excluded in the case of Latin prayers. Accordingly, in all cases, prayer in the mother tongue is the most advantageous.<sup>1</sup>

There is little doubt but that principles such as these were accepted by Thomas à Kempis whilst at Deventer, and exercised no small weight with him in what he afterwards wrote and taught.

When the learned historian Gieseler says that ‘among the small and peaceful circle of religious mystics, no man exercised so important an influence as Thomas Hemerken (à Kempis),’ he adds these significant words: ‘In this circle the translation of the Bible also which seems to have been printed in large numbers at this time, may well have been in use.’ The German translation of the Bible was first *printed* in 1462 at Mayence; and on the whole fourteen times before the Reformation at Strasburg, Augsburg, and Nuremberg.<sup>2</sup> This was considerably in advance of what was done in England; since the first *printed* edition of any part of the Scriptures in English was of the New Testament at Hamburg in the year 1526. It was chiefly translated by Tindal. But the whole of this impression (with the exception, it is said, of a single copy) was bought up and burnt by Tonstal, Bishop of London, and Sir Thomas More. Another English edition was immediately put forth in 1527, and a third in 1528. It was not till 1535 that a complete edition of the Bible was printed in English by Tindal and Coverdale. Thus in Germany they had translations of the Bible printed more than sixty years before they had it in England. Nine years before Thomas à Kempis died the Bible printed in the German tongue

<sup>1</sup> From other extract concerning Prayers in the mother tongue, *Daventr. Illustr.* pp. 55-58.

<sup>2</sup> *Eccles. Hist.*, vol. v. 74.

was circulated, and there is little doubt but that his eyes were gladdened, and his heart rejoiced, by having a sight of one, and knowing that the blessed Word of God, which he laboured so hard to make known and publish abroad, would now have a wide and unlimited circulation. It is not known what part the Brothers of Common Life directly took in the work of *translating* and *printing the Bible*. They must certainly have largely helped forward the work, for it was congenial to their spirits, and they were the foremost in their day to promote the reading of the Bible, and getting the people to pray in their own language, in such measure as they were able. And in opposition to leading divines of the times, they fearlessly advocated their opinion.

The enunciation of such sentiments were sure to attract attention; and the examples of the Brethren, with whom Zerbolt was associated, contributed greatly to spread the reading of the Scriptures among the laity, and to make the use of the mother tongue in the department of religion more universal.<sup>1</sup>

To form some idea of the bearings of this teaching on the people around them, and on future generations in Germany, I shall here add a few very appropriate and forcible words from Ullmann, relative to the subject. He says:—‘This exerted an important influence in various directions, on *preaching*, to which it gave greater life and vigour; on *prayer*, rendering it more sincere and earnest; and on *piety in general*, which it increased in affection, depth, and ardour. Like mysticism, it served to give Christianity an inward seat, out of which the Reformation arose. Even objectively, however, the matter was of great consequence. The Reformation was the emancipation of the nationalities from the unity of Rome, in which, during the middle ages, they were entangled. It essentially involved, as we have already seen, a popular element. Nationality cleaves to language, and the acquisition by countries of Europe of a literature of their own, was the first step toward their deliverance from Rome, which, being

<sup>1</sup> *Vide* Delprat, sec. 128.

Latin itself, strove to Latinise them all. They were become ripe for their freedom, when Christianity, and the piety which it inspires, put on the national dress. As soon as the German preached and heard German sermons, read a German Bible, possessed a German theology, and prayed German prayers, the bond which connected him inwardly with Rome was severed, and inward separation could not but soon lead to outward separation also. The vindication of the national independence was completed by Luther, who never could have become the reformer of Germany and Europe had he not written, and spoken, and sung, and thundered in German. We see, however, by the example before us, and by others which we do not here notice, that the cause of national emancipation in religion had been advanced for centuries before it reached the outbreak in Luther's time, and especially how large a part in its advancement is due to the Brethren of Common Life.<sup>1</sup>

Gerard Zerbolt, moreover, undertook the defence of the manner of life adopted by 'the Brothers of Common Life.' It will be remembered how bitterly they were assailed in the earlier portion of their history by the Mendicant Friars, and how fearlessly Gerard the Great denounced from the pulpit of Deventer the attack made upon them, and how he supported the system that had been established by him and identified with himself. And in like manner Gerard Zerbolt with his pen ably showed that there was nothing to be condemned, but on the contrary, much to be approved in the method of the Brothers consorting together.

The reader must bear in mind that the order of Canons Regular had not been as yet instituted among them, nor had the monasteries of Windesheim and Mount St. Agnes as yet been begun. It may, however, be thought that the taking up of the conventual life and vows afterwards by several of the Brothers was not in keeping with the advocacy of Zerbolt. It must be observed in reply to this, then, that the point of his arguments is not against taking

<sup>1</sup> Ullmann, *Reformers before the Reformation*, Tr. R. M. ii. 113.



these vows, but against those who said that it was improper or illegal for Christians to live together a strictly religious life without vows. Zerbolt maintained that it was not only lawful, but highly beneficial for Christian people to agree thus to live even without vows, when able to dispense with them.

‘If you do not live according to the rule of any Order,’ said the monks, ‘and yet do not constitute a true Order, you are an equivocal body. The position you occupy is not recognised by law, but ecclesiastically illegitimate. You must abandon it, and enter wholly into the world, or into monachism. You cannot continue to be what you are.’ From these and similar allegations Gerard Zerbolt was induced to compose a special treatise on the manner of life observed by the pious Brotherhood, in which he explained the relation in which they stood to cloisteral life, and at the same time showed that the societies formed neither a new order, nor a college, nor a corporation; and that, least of all, did they deserve the name of forbidden *conventicles*.<sup>1</sup> Conventicles, he says, are clandestine meetings, attended only by conspirators, heretics, or rebels, but of the crimes of such men the Brothers are wholly guiltless. To a corporation or college certain legal forms and institutions necessarily belong, for instance, elected presidents, a syndic, and such like, but these have no place among the Brethren.

Just as little do they constitute a new Order. An Order always rests upon three things, the vow, the rule, and the obedience, which is paid to man in place of God. But of all this we have here nothing. The Brethren merely live together in one house, as Christians did in the days of the Apostles (a comparison not in all respects applicable), who speak of the Church in the house. They differ from other people at the most in their simplicity, to

<sup>1</sup> ‘. . . Minime autem *conventiculi* nomine hæ cohabitationes dicendæ sint.’ And then in the sequel: ‘Gravius autem errare, qui *conventiculorum* convicium eis ausint facere, cum *conventicula* sint conspiratorum, hæreticorum, seditiosorum, qualia crimina in sese non agnoscant,’—*Davent. Illust.*, p. 37.

which none can object, and not by uniformity of dress, either as respects shape or colour, for every one chooses the dress he thinks best, and changes it as he likes. Community of goods as practised by the Brethren, and which consists in each freely surrendering to the society the right to administer and use his property, is wholly unobjectionable, and lawful to laymen no less than to clergymen. Obedience need not, as in monachism, be paid solely to a superior, but may be practised between equals, such as the Brethren are, one exciting and admonishing another to do what of itself is obligatory. Confession of sin, in so far as it is a sacramental transaction, and accompanied by absolution and penance, cannot be rightfully made except to an ordained priest. In the absence of such a priest, however, and in the case of mere venial sins, where moral help and advice are all that are asked, confession as a free effusion of the heart may be made even to a layman, for here neither the power of the keys nor yet erudition are requisite, but only the right spirit and experience. Such confession of sin may have a most beneficial moral effect, and for that reason the mutual practice of it has been introduced among the Brethren.

Besides, the Brethren have other customs and fixed regulations, but without these no community, no family, no gymnasium, nor institute can exist at all. All depends on such customs being innocent and praiseworthy. But of that description is manual labour, which the apostles and most holy men have recommended both by precept and example. But when the Brethren who are domiciled in one house pray and labour with each other, rise and go to bed at the same hour, they do no more than is done in all well-regulated families. Nay, in many towns, the tradesmen begin and finish their work at the sound of the public bell, and yet they are not for that reason monks. Consequently the Brothers of the Common Life are neither inwardly nor outwardly to be considered as a monastic order.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Daventria Illust.*, pp. 36-40; see Ullmann, *Ref. before the Ref.*, II.

Thus does Gerard Zerbolt set forth in a plain and temperate manner the simple and unfettered condition in which 'the Brothers of Common Life' lived. They dwelt together as a Christian household, living a very earnest, self-denying, laborious life, sincere, loving, abstemious, and full of goodwill towards all men. There was nothing but what was most exemplary, nothing but what was open and noble among men, and nothing but what could with great advantage be more universally followed, nothing but what might be practically adopted, in the main, by members of the Church of England. Without contending, at the present, for the advantages which such a life offers above other ways, let it suffice to say, that, as there are multifarious conditions of life in which persons are placed by their various duties and callings, so is it highly desirable that numbers of these, who have been compelled to abandon their homes, should not be condemned to live almost as the outcasts of society, to live in loneliness and without loving sympathy and fellowship, except what they can by chance pick up; and that to thousands of young men and young women living in the centres of our large towns and cities, it would be a most inestimable blessing, and would be most highly prized, if they had the opportunity of living together a truly Christian life in a plain unfettered way, like 'the Brothers of Common Life,' in fraternal community, with kindred souls, 'steadfastly purposing to lead a new life;' having a special regard to the discipline of their own souls, the service of their God and Saviour, and the welfare of their fellow-creatures, whilst they at the same time diligently and faithfully pursued their several employments or callings in life. I doubt not but that clergymen also would find it infinitely preferable to live thus in holy fellowship with devout laymen, than in living alone; and more advantageous than living with clergy only in some clergy house. The living with those who have to mix with the world and encounter its snares and

temptations would add immensely to their knowledge of human life, and show them how to deal profitably with their fellow-creatures in discharging the duties of their holy profession. But I must return to the work more directly before us.

Thomas à Kempis gives us a short sketch of the lives of two other priests in their community, who were as shining lights in their day and generation, and to whom he himself felt indebted. The first of these is John de Gronde, who died the same year that Thomas à Kempis came to Deventer. It is somewhat uncertain whether he ever saw him. His death, however, caused him to be much talked about, and à Kempis could not fail to be deeply interested with the accounts given respecting him, since Gronde was one of the first of Gerard the Great's fellow-labourers. He was a native of Octmersheim, and had laboured as a priest with singular success in Amsterdam, when Gerard invited him to come and help him at Deventer. Writing to the priests who devoutly served the Lord in Amsterdam, who took a keen interest in his work, and with whom he was united in the special bonds of love, Gerard said, 'Be it known unto you that the Church of Deventer lacks a good priest to assist in the confession of the spiritual, because we have no such person allotted to us. I ask you, therefore, if there be no formidable impediment of the holy Church in Amsterdam, that our beloved John de Gronde may be removed hither from your place, since without doubt he will be profitable to us.' And to this appeal they graciously consented.

Coming, therefore, to Deventer, Gronde was kindly received by Gerard, and lived humbly and devoutly the common life in the ancient house of Florentius with the first Brethren of that holy congregation; and being fervent in spirit, it is said, that he was wont very early in the morning to stir up the Brethren to prayer, saying, 'Arise, watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation.' He was one of the most celebrated of the early preachers of the society, and seems to have been of special service



when, through the malice of his enemies, Gerard the Great was not permitted to continue to preach in public. It is especially recorded of him that his voice filled the great church of Deventer, where he frequently preached in a most solemn manner. Father Florentius, among others, is said to have listened attentively to his preaching, being greatly desirous to enjoy the sweetness of the divine discourse from the mouth of the preacher, 'whose voice was sonorous, penetrating the ears of men, and bringing compunction to the heart.'

From time to time he went to Zwolle to comfort the Brothers and Sisters dwelling there, and, continues à Kempis :—

On one occasion he preached many times during Lent ; and once on Good Friday, for more than six hours consecutively, with only the rest of a few minutes in the midst of his discourse, to restore the attention of his auditors.<sup>1</sup> Out of considerate charity he made a long stay with the Brethren there, hearing the confessions of certain devout persons, giving salutary remedies to the penitents, and persuading all who listened to him to remain steadfast in the holy estate they had embraced. For he found much people in that place wishful to serve God ; and happily they went on multiplying till our time. So diligently was the devout preacher sought after, and with such pleasure was he heard, that when receiving hospitality, he would not deny the word of salvation, whilst sitting at dinner, to those that sought for it ; but whilst refreshing the body, he administered the medicine of life to the souls of the contrite, on their having made confession of their faults. In this peculiar method of work he seemed to be imitating Christ, Who, whilst eating at the table, graciously received the penitence of the blessed Mary Magdalene, and reproved, as well as wisely instructed Simon for thinking evil concerning the penitent, and gave a good reason for the works of piety manifested towards Himself.

He also sometimes, we learn, visited the Brethren at Mount St. Agnes, to hear their confessions, for they were

<sup>1</sup> Neale, *Jansenist Church*, p. 88, says that Thomas heard him on this occasion ; but the words do not seem to warrant this, though it is possible he might have been present.

as yet poor and without a priest.<sup>1</sup> And after having given them good counsel, he would hasten to return home, unwilling to be long separated from the beloved Brethren of Florentius, with whom it was a solace to him to live in unity, and who most cordially loved him in return. He was simple in his dress, temperate in diet, and not given to flatter worldly people for reward, but as a true evangelical preacher he sought to gain souls, and promote the increase of the spiritual life in the houses of the 'devotees.'

Thomas à Kempis further tells us that after the death of Gerard the Great, Gronde removed to the Sister-house in Deventer and occupied Gerard's chamber. When therefore he had ministered faithfully to the Lord, and had accomplished the days of his vocation, and the time had come when he might receive the eternal reward of his labours, he began to be grievously afflicted with sickness. And thinking that he could not continue long, he gave instructions that he might be carried back to the house of Florentius, since he desired to end his days in the midst of his Brethren, to whose prayers and kind attentions he confided himself, that they might assist him in his greatest extremity, and faithfully defend him from the assailing adversary. And this was accomplished through God's mercy. For he was greatly comforted by the presence of Master Florentius and his Brethren, and on the entreaty of the beloved Father he ended his last words in the name of the Lord. For when his end was drawing near, he said to Florentius, 'Behold the enemy is seeking to disquiet me, and would confound me at the last.' To whom the reverend Father replied, 'Do not fear, but trust in the Lord and be still.' Then Gronde, as if truly obedient to his word, said, 'In Nomine Domini.'<sup>2</sup> And thus commending himself to the Lord in his death-struggle, he breathed forth his spirit about four o'clock in the morning on May 7, A.D.

<sup>1</sup> The Monastery had not at this time been established there. There was, however, a house of the Brothers of Common Life, of which some mention will be made hereafter.

<sup>2</sup> *Chron. Mt. St. Agnes*, p. 154.

1392. He was buried by the side of Gerard the Great, in the same tomb, where they both alike rest in peace. And, asks à Kempis, 'Was not this very appropriate, that in as much as they had loved each other in life, so in death they should not be separated from one another, but should in the same church be enclosed under the seal of one stone, looking for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, to be raised up to life again by Him?'<sup>1</sup>

When Gronde died, he was succeeded by JOHN BRINCKERINCK, a native of Zutphen, and formerly a beloved disciple of Gerard: and of him I must now make some mention. He is sometimes called John of Zutphen, being a native of the same town with Gerard Zerbolt. This priest was a preacher of the Gospel in the great Church at Deventer, to whom Thomas à Kempis chiefly listened during his stay there; and respecting whom he is pleased to furnish us with several interesting particulars.

When Gerard the Great came and preached in various places, Brinckerinck often associated himself with him as travelling companion, as Luke did with Paul. In this way he often heard and learnt many good things from him, having become a devout imitator of his works, and a worthy witness of his sanctity, going in and out with him, reading the 'Hours,' and diligently performing other pious offices. After the death of Gerard, he lived devoutly and humbly under the rule of the Reverend Father Florentius, and zealously followed the good instructions which he had eagerly imbibed from the preaching of Gerard. By the counsel of God he was promoted to the priesthood, and remained with the Brethren in the Congregation, actively labouring in the establishment of the first house of Florentius, until on the death of John de Gronde he was appointed to the government of the Sisters. Like an earnest man and zealous for purity, he ruled with all good discipline the House intrusted to him, not sparing his own labour, but often exerting himself beyond his strength in his desire to win souls. Sometimes he preached the Word of God in Church, sharply rebuking vice, and recommending virtue in an excellent manner as was fitting.<sup>2</sup>

On several occasions à Kempis seems to have been

<sup>1</sup> *Vita Joannis Gronde*, No. iii. pp. 70-72.

<sup>2</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Joannis Brinckerinck*, No. iv.

deeply touched by the preaching of Brinckerinck, for the impression of what he said seems to have remained with him all his life long, and in after years he makes particular mention of some sermons that he especially remembered. Thus for instance he says :—

Twice I heard him preach on the passion of the Lord very affectingly and at considerable length. His first theme was, ‘God spared not His own Son.’ And the second was taken from the Psalm, ‘What shall I render unto the Lord for all that He hath done unto me?’ . . . And on another occasion, he was once preaching on the Circumcision of the Lord, and treating most pleasantly and sweetly of the name of Jesus, exalting this blessed and delicious name above all things in heaven and earth. At length he descended in his sermon to rebuke the irreverence and familiarity with which certain worldly and foolish men treated the name of Jesus. ‘Why,’ said he, ‘there are some who say with a contemptuous sneer, “Aha ! Jesus is the God of the Béguines !” O miserable and foolish men, what is it you say ? Who then is your God ? Truly your God is the devil, because you say, Jesus is the God of the Béguines. This is a great scandal to you. But to them, this holy name is a great honour and a singular joy ; for they constantly repeat the name of Jesus, they pay Him the highest worship, and before all things, and above all the names of the Saints, they love and adore Jesus the Son of God, whom ye deride and despise. Truly it is the Brothers and the Béguine Sisters that delight in the name of Jesus, and do devoutly praise Him, and salute each other in the name of Jesus. Woe unto you who have the devil in your mouths oftener than Jesus, because Jesus seems to you to be too lowly and despised.’ Saying these things, adds à Kempis, he gladdened the lovers of Jesus, and confounded those who derided Him, as they justly deserved to be.<sup>1</sup>

Thus by the devout he was heard with pleasure ; and though certain individuals interrupted him at times with murmurs and dissent, because he condemned their faults when needful, he was not daunted by their reproaches, for he loved to speak the truth, and to contend earnestly for righteousness, choosing rather to serve God and profit the good, than consent to the wicked.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Joannis Brinckerinck*, No. iv. sec. 3.    <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* sec. 2.



Under his rule and protection the number of the Béguines increased greatly ; so that he had to make other provision for those who joined their society. Thomas à Kempis thus speaks of this work :—

When the number of the handmaids of God began to increase, John, placing his hope in the help of the Most High, made larger buildings for them to live in, that he might save many souls who had fled to Christ from the shipwreck of this world. At length with great labour he erected outside the city, towards the north, a large monastery for holy women (*monasterium sanctimonialium*), into which he received several sisters from the house of Gerard, and caused them to be instructed in sacred literature, and to be invested with the habit of the Regulars. These he diligently directed, with those also who remained in the city, for twenty-six years till the end of his life, though some of them were sent to new houses which were being established in other places. For at the first he found only sixteen sisters living in common, but God so multiplied their number in his days, that at his death he left a hundred and fifty.<sup>1</sup>

But like many of God's great saints, he walked in fear and trembling for his own salvation ; lest, as St. Paul speaks of himself, having preached to others he himself should be a castaway. How humbly and distrustingly, says à Kempis, he thought of himself among all these good works, may be seen from the words which he addressed to one of his familiar companions.

For when they were walking on the way together, and discoursing of the future life, he spoke thus, ' See here, Brother, if the angel of the Lord should now come to me and say, " Bend thyself down, John, and suffer thy head to be cut off, and thou shalt be in purgatory," I would willingly undergo this, that I might be assured of salvation, and so might die in grace.' At another time in preaching he said, ' O how great and high a state is that of the priesthood, the dignity of which scarce any mortal man can worthily fulfil. For myself, if I could as easily put off the sacerdotal vestment as put it on, I would put it off here at once.' Let those attend to this, continues Thomas à Kempis, who boast of their Holy Orders, and are puffed up, and consider not the duties to which they are bound. Let them learn to think

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Joannis Brinckerinck*, No. iv. sec. 4.

humbly of themselves, to humble their hearts in the fear of God, for the humbler a man now is in his own eyes, the more secure will he be with God in the future life.<sup>1</sup>

After mentioning the many labours performed by this servant of God in his life-time, and the reproaches and detractions he suffered from the envious, and his overcoming them all by patience, and alluding to the amount of good he had accomplished in all the works he had begun, and the lowly opinion he had of himself, whereby he lived to the glory of God and attracted many to a holy life, à Kempis thus speaks of him as he draws to the close of his earthly career:—

And so, after he had laboured long and with much fruit in the vineyard of the Lord, which the right hand of God had planted, the day passed on to the evening, when he should receive the reward of his labour, and cease from all earthly work, according to the word of the Lord, Who said : ‘Call the labourers and give them their hire.’ For behold he was seized with a violent fever ; and thinking that he was about to depart, he sent word to the Prior of Windesheim that he was very ill, and that the end of his days was at hand. When the Prior came he explained to him the anxious desire that he had, and committed to him, as to a faithful steward, the care of the holy women, charging him to provide for them a good ruler ; so that the zealous discipline lately introduced might not decay by reason of neglect or pride.<sup>2</sup> When, therefore, the Feast of the Annunciation had illuminated the earth, on the following day, the seventh before the kalends of April, John, the faithful servant of Christ, earnestly looking for the heavenly country, rendered up his soul to God, Whom from his youth he had endeavoured to serve with his whole strength. The year was 1419, when the see of Utrecht was filled by the venerable Bishop Frederick de Blanckenheim, the pious and renowned patron of all devout persons. He was buried in the Convent of the Regulars at Dyepenuene, in the middle of the Choir, before the high altar, which he had himself placed there, and dedicated to the honour of the Blessed Virgin and Saint Agnes.

Thus he lived nineteen years after Thomas left Deven-

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Joannis Brinckerinck*, No. iv. sec. 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* sec. 6. ‘Ne fervor disciplinæ noviter introductus, per negligentiam aut insolentiam deperiret.’

ter, and did much to keep alive the spirit of vital Christianity.

Surely the lives of such men as these were as lights shining in dark places and in a corrupt age, reflecting in very truth the Light of Life, to guide many souls into the way of Salvation; and their light is reviving to us who behold it at some distance of time, for it must rejoice the heart of every good man, of every true lover of Christ, that there were even in those degenerate days which preceded the Reformation more than a hundred years, such faithful men who bore witness to the Truth.

## CHAPTER XII.

The biographical writings of à Kempis—The men of whom he writes a blessing in their day and afterwards—These memoirs accord with the ‘Imitatio,’ though written later—The memoir of Lubert Berner—A Priest renowned for the sanctity of his life—The opposition of his father to his embracing a religious life—Their future reconciliation—Anecdotes of his obedience, and of his bearing reproofs—His trying illness—The ‘sequence’ used when the Brothers assembled round his death-bed—A singular and touching account of his death—The Brothers much affected by it—À Kempis moved by the loss of Berner and other Brethren—A soliloquy by à Kempis suitable to the occasion.

BEFORE proceeding further with these short biographical sketches from the hand of Thomas à Kempis, it is desirable to notice the reason which is given why he undertook to write them, and the influence they were calculated to exercise upon the ‘Brothers’ in other parts, and upon those that were earnest-minded, then, and afterwards. It appears from what à Kempis says that he had been requested to write a few brief memoirs of the early Fathers and Brothers of the Common Life, lest the memory of their exemplary lives should fade away, or be lost sight of, and that by preserving some narrative of them, the Brethren of the Community at a distance, and in succeeding generations, might be stimulated by the remembrance of their many excellent virtues ; and being sweetly drawn by the fragrance and attraction of their pious and holy examples to live as they had done, their lives also might, one and all, redound to the glory of the Divine Name.<sup>1</sup>

Thomas à Kempis had far outlived all the first members of the Brotherhood ; and as many of the younger members of the Community among whom he lived, and several

<sup>1</sup> Vide Prologus in *Vitam Ven. Mag. Gerard.*, et Prologus in *Vitam Rev. D. Florent.*, et Prologus in *Vitas Discipulorum Dom. Florentii.*



others who came up from the distant houses of the Society to the yearly chapter at Windesheim, had no personal knowledge of these first worthies of their fraternity, they were frequently making inquiries about them, anxious to ascertain as many particulars as they could, and what information they could gather respecting first one, and then another, of those who had taken part in originating the society, and who had adorned their holy fellowship by their intense zeal and their humble self-denying lives. Eventually a number of these individuals who were desirous of learning more about them, besought à Kempis to compile some account of them, as no one was better able than he was to give them the intelligence they wanted ; for with most of those of whom he wrote he had been personally acquainted, and from these persons also he had obtained many particulars respecting the founder, and one or two of the older Brethren, of whom he had not himself so much knowledge. Besides, his deep interest in the labours of these men, the warm affection which he had towards them, as well as his skill and ability in writing, well fitted him for being the biographer of the Brotherhood. Indeed, if Thomas had not undertaken the work, in all probability, succeeding generations would have known little of these men, illustrious for sanctity, whose earnest endeavour after a personal reformation of religion was the earnest of a more general Reformation that was eventually brought about.

And a very valuable and edifying work it was which Thomas à Kempis undertook, in publishing these brief memoirs. They served to preserve in the body a traditional memory of that faithful endeavour and resolute purpose to restore the Christian life to greater purity and simplicity after the pattern of its divine original—to break through the encrusted forms, and deadening influences of a fearful degeneracy in religion—to encounter and overcome all the difficulties and hindrances of society which beset them in their efforts after holiness—and firmly, yet humbly, and in dependence upon God's promised help, to fashion

their lives and conduct, as nearly as possible, under the circumstances in which they were placed, in accordance with the example of Christ our Lord ; and in doing this, to take the primitive Christians at Jerusalem as their pattern, and to be guided in their actions by what they had learnt respecting them in Holy Scripture, and the writings of the early Fathers of the Church.

This noble and laudable effort after greater purity and holiness of life forms a bright and cheering page in the annals of the Christian Church, whose history is too often, alas ! taken up with heresies, persecutions, bitter strifes, schisms, and dark records of corruption and misdeeds ; it is a wondrous testimony to the work of the Holy Spirit, that His power and vital influence are as strong as ever in the Church, thirteen or fourteen hundred years after He came to be with us, even as in the days of the Apostles, and that the process of time does not lessen or weaken His grace, like any material force, for the conversion and comforting of weary souls, when His holy help is truly and earnestly sought for. It is an assurance to all men that God is ready to pour out in these days also His Holy Spirit upon His servants and handmaids, if He is only faithfully inquired of to do it, and that the Divine promise still holds good which says, ‘ Prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of Hosts, if I will not open to you the windows of Heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it.’<sup>1</sup> And the account of the lives of such men who took an active part in bringing about and establishing this ‘ New Devotion,’ at the first in that barren, wild, and blighted period, would certainly have a powerful influence on all the high-minded and devout men in the several congregations of the Brotherhood, in kindling and maintaining a like spirit and practice among them, so that they, in their turn, should be induced to keep alive the heavenly flame, should heartily strive to live as their Brethren before them had done, of whom they heard such excellent things, and that they should be careful not

<sup>1</sup> *Mal.* iii. 10.

to come short of the measure of faith and of holy obedience, to which they attained. The biography of these men was, as it were, an invaluable treasure to the society—the most beautiful and precious legacy with which it had been endowed—of which the future members might be justly proud, in which they doubtless gloried, and by which, if they were so minded, they might animate themselves to noble endeavours.

Many other Christians in those days, and in succeeding ages, who were not directly connected with the Brothers of Common Life, would derive no little profit and advantage from hearing about these holy men of God. None who have within them the stirrings of Divine grace, or the lingering desire of rising from a fallen condition to a higher and better life upon earth than is usually manifested among professing Christians, can read or learn of such men, thus struggling through much opposition and trial to maintain a life of holiness, but must feel inwardly moved to make some attempt to attain a higher level, and be both incited and encouraged to follow their good example in the holy art of Christian living.

But there is another point which should be here borne in mind, and to which I must recall attention. In the earlier part of this work it was intimated that a striking agreement was to be found between the books of the 'Imitation' and the other writings of à Kempis, and to support what was there advanced it is important to observe in passing, how these short and simple memoirs represent and pourtray the very kind of life which is set forth and urged upon us in the 'De Imitatione Christi.' Here we see in this gallery of portraits, with which Thomas adorns the Brotherhood, the likeness of individuals in whom was manifested the religious spirit, views, and practices, upheld and recommended in that remarkable book. These brief annals given by Thomas serve in a wonderful degree to illustrate this excellent book of devotion, and give life, reality, and force to it. Many persons, reading the devout instructions contained therein, come not unfrequently to

the conclusion, that the tone of it is pitched too high, that it is all very well as a high ideal of the Christian life, but that it is next to impossible to practise it, constituted and circumstanced as we are, and that it is well-nigh useless to attempt to follow its godly counsels : hence the few efforts in these days to attain the saintly life ; but here we have examples of men living the very lives therein set forth and inculcated. Thomas à Kempis shows us that men have lived after a manner which is justly reckoned so exalted and so heavenly that the generality of their fellow men, counselled thereto by the '*De Imitatione Christi*,' think it almost vain to attempt to follow ; but what men have done, men can still do ; they can at least aim at some higher level than that in which they are now walking, if they will, if with a holy purpose they set themselves to attain to that life which is a reflex of Christ's life on earth, that life wherein there is a conscious doing of the will of God in their daily lives and outward duties and callings, as the angels do in heaven, and wherein there is a hearty aim and desire to live wholly for the inheritance of the Saints in Light.

The '*De Imitatione Christi*' was not written by one who had lived alone, apart from his fellow men, who had but little practical knowledge of what he wrote about, save what he evolved from his own isolated life, and could practise in the narrow confines of his cell, or within the limited bounds of his monastery. Thomas à Kempis was associated with other men, living, it is true, a highly cultured Christian life, in all simplicity, fervour, and humility, diligently following useful employments, particularly beneficial to their fellow creatures. And the '*De Imitatione Christi*' derived its inspiration largely from witnessing the beauty, the rare holiness, the sweet peace, and bright hopefulness of such a life ; it arose and was drawn largely from living this life with the Brothers of Common Life, and from the practical experience the writer had of it, together with his matured thoughts upon religion. Let it be remembered that Thomas à Kempis had not only himself for many long



years been faithfully endeavouring to practise and pursue such a course of holy living, as he depicts and recommends in the '*De Imitatione Christi*;' but he had before his mind's eye the lovely picture, the inciting remembrance of the lives of Gerard the Great and Gerard of Zutphen, of Gronde, and of Brinckerinck, of Florentius, and many others, when he wrote and composed the book with pious carefulness and devout consideration.

Moreover, he had not only drunk in the spirit of these fervent yet noble-hearted men of God, and had striven with all his soul to attain to the exalted measure of the Christian stature which they had reached, but he had treasured up their most valuable sentiments and precepts, their matured judgments upon worldly things and the ways of men, upon the best method of serving God, attaining to true peace of mind and securing everlasting salvation, which he had learned from them in a variety of ways by coming into daily, hourly contact with them. All this, together with what he himself had learned of the Christian life from his study of the Word of God, and more particularly the Life of Christ as unfolded in the Gospels, and as taught him by the help of God's Holy Spirit, upon Whom he constantly and ever consciously depended, eminently qualified him for writing and producing such a work as that of the '*De Imitatione Christi*.'

It would be no difficult matter to give ample evidence of what has been advanced respecting the agreement of these lives of the Brothers of Common Life with what is said in the '*De Imitatione Christi*,' and to draw a picture of these godly men out of this estimable book. Of course, what is said, more or less applies to all truly godly men, for the passages relate to the essential characteristics of the Christian life in every age, and must in some degree be found in every man who is transformed by the Holy Spirit, from being one of the children of this world to one of the children of light. But collectively they will be found peculiarly applicable to these Brothers of Common Life mentioned by à Kempis, and may be read as if he had them

in remembrance when he wrote the book. I shall here give an illustration or example of this from the 'Imitation,' changing only slightly the passages as to the number and person, and it will be seen at once how the words apply to them, and very accurately describe what manner of men they were.

They cast away all hindrances to grace, that it might be poured forth within them.

They sought privacy, loving to dwell alone with themselves, that they might pour out devout prayer to God, that they might keep their hearts contrite, and their consciences pure.

They esteemed the world as nothing ; and preferred the service of God before all outward things.

They sought to conquer themselves, that they might more easily subdue all things else. Hence they kept themselves in subjection, having their sensual appetites in subordination to their reason, and their reason in all things subservient to Christ.

They walked in simplicity, and abstained from all appearance of evil, making no false pretences, and doing all things purely for God, in Whom they ultimately reposed.

They sought not their own advantage and comfort, but rather what might be for the good of many. Ascribing all honour and glory to God, they gladly suffered reproach for the Name of Jesus.

Shunning idleness, they gladly underwent toil, delighting in what was plain and humble, nor spurning what was rough and common.

They looked to things eternal, and did not cling to temporal things ; they were not disturbed by losses, nor provoked by harsh words, because their treasure and their joy were in Heaven, where nothing perishes.

They were kind and ready to share with others, and shunned what was singular, content with a little, thinking it more blessed to give than to receive.

Instead of seeking outward comforts, which bring gratification of sense, they sought to be comforted by God alone, and to delight in the Supreme Good above all visible things.

Instead of doing everything for gain, and for their own convenience, doing nothing unless they were paid for it, and hoping to get either an equivalent, or an advantage in exchange for every kindness, or else praise or favour, desiring that their deeds, gifts, and words should be highly esteemed, they sought for no other

prize but God alone, they desired nothing temporal beyond what was necessary, except it were that they might employ it for the obtaining of things eternal.

Instead of being fond of many friends and relations, and boasting of station and birth, making a point to please those in power, fawning on the rich, praising those like to themselves, they loved their enemies and were not puffed up by a crowd of friends, making no account of birth, unless it were accompanied with greater virtue ; they favoured the poor more than the rich, sympathised more with the innocent than with the powerful, rejoiced in the truth, and not in deceit ; and exhorted the good to covet earnestly the best gifts, and through virtue to grow like to the Son of God.

Now from the memoirs we have already given of some of the early members of the Brotherhood from the pen of Thomas à Kempis, it will readily be perceived that the above is a fair and accurate description of the lives and characters of these men ; and yet the passages, with only a slight alteration to make them personal, have been taken from two chapters of the '*De Imitatione Christi*' (Book iii. 53, 54).

Here are some words without any alteration, taken from Book i. chapter 25 of the '*Imitation*,' which directly apply.

How pleasant and sweet it is to see Brethren fervent and devout, regular, and well disciplined !

Be mindful of the resolution thou hast taken up, and set before thee the image of the Crucified.

A religious, who exercises himself seriously and devoutly in the most holy Life and Passion of the Lord, will find there abundantly all things useful and necessary for him ; nor need he seek any better thing beyond Jesus.

A fervent religious bears, and takes all things well that are commanded him.

After what manner do other religious live, who are under the strict discipline of the cloister ?

They seldom go abroad, they live retired, their diet is very poor, their habit coarse, they labour much, they speak little, they watch long, they rise early, they spend much time in prayer, they read often, and keep themselves in all discipline.

When a man is come to this, that he seeks his consolation

from no creature, then he begins to have the first perfect relish for God ; then likewise will he be well content, whatever befall him.

If thou givest thyself to fervour, thou shalt find great peace ; and thou shalt feel labour lighter for the grace of God and the love of virtue.

And many more similar passages might be produced. But what need is there to go further to prove this point, since we might go over the greater part of this devotional work, and trace the lineaments of their character in it : sufficient has surely been said to show that the book had taken its impress, tone, and spirit from what à Kempis had seen, heard, and known of these virtuous and godly men.

There is a difficulty in determining the exact period when Thomas à Kempis wrote many of his works, but it seems probable, from a general consideration of what is said, that the '*De Imitatione Christi*' was written before these various lives of the early Brothers were compiled, and that the latter were not written till many years afterwards ; but, however simple and plain the narratives may be, it is a matter of congratulation that he was induced to write them, since they serve as a standing witness or record that the life inculcated in the '*De Imitatione Christi*' had been followed, had been lived—besides being a valuable means of illustrating and enforcing it. We have in the *Lives* a key, as it were, to the '*De Imitatione Christi*,' which fits it in a remarkable manner, and opens and reveals to us in a clearer and more effective way the treasures of heavenly wisdom which it contains.

We must bear in mind also—what I have already called attention to elsewhere—that in these *Lives* as well as in the '*De Imitatione*,' we have, as in a mirror, the life of Thomas à Kempis depicted, the manner of living, the motives and principles of his daily actions ; how he endeavoured to follow Christ, and how he set himself to do the will of God, and attain true peace and salvation for his soul ; and further, we behold the life of God in the soul, which he was anxious to infuse into, and have carried



out by, the other members of the Brotherhood to which he belonged, so that in both these works which Thomas à Kempis wrote, we have, in a great measure, a fair idea, as it were, a pretty accurate description of what his life and theirs were, and what they aimed at.

As then we cannot fail to learn much of the character and manner of life followed by à Kempis through knowing something of his friends and the kind of company he kept, and for which we are especially indebted to à Kempis himself, so we find in the very description of them in these memoirs, that he frequently gives us an insight into his own mind, his views of things, the way of life he approves of, and considers worthy of imitation. I shall, therefore, now proceed to give a few more of the short sketches which he has drawn up of the early Fathers and Brothers of the Common Life

Some allusion has been already made to LUBERT BERNER. The reader may remember how much Gerard Zerbolt took to heart the death of this Brother. But he was only one amongst the rest of the Brethren that was greatly affected by this bereavement. In reply to a letter sent to Florentius,<sup>1</sup> announcing his death, the Rector of the Community says, that the measure of their grief at the tidings was so great and grievous, that he could scarcely read a few lines of the account without their shedding a copious flood of tears, and that it was with difficulty he could on this occasion write a few lines to his friend. À Kempis was among the number of those who grieved for his death, and he speaks of him as 'one of the first luminaries of the Devotees,' a priest of a very lowly disposition and great in obedience, and by whose fervid conversation in Christ many of the Brethren known to à Kempis in Windesheim, in Mount St. Agnes, and at the Fountain of the Blessed Mary, near Arnheim, some of which were alive, and others fallen asleep in the Lord,

<sup>1</sup> It is probable that it was at this time that Florentius and many of the Brethren had been compelled to seek a refuge elsewhere, as it has been intimated before, on account of the plague in his house.

were greatly resuscitated in soul. 'But how very little can I say,' he continues, 'of such an excellent man, concerning whom so many of the Religious can bear testimony.' The chief men of Deventer, and those connected with its communal affairs, recognised his great virtues and the multitude of his honourable actions; and of these Thomas à Kempis promises to give us a few examples in his memoir of him, from which we here extract the following narrative.

Lubert Berner, otherwise called Lubert ten Bosche, was born at Zwolle of a good family, and having finished his education, and taken his degree at the university of Prague, he returned to settle in his native city, where he was joyfully welcomed by his friends. But not long after this, being drawn by the affability and friendship of the devout Brethren, he was moved by a heavenly inspiration to amendment of life; and, because his parents and acquaintance were much opposed to his adopting a more religious life, he departed from them secretly; and for the purpose of serving Christ, he happily changed his pursuit of worldly things into that which was spiritual.

He came, continues à Kempis, to Deventer, to Florentius, then so renowned for the sanctity of his life, and being paternally received by him, he was taught to renounce entirely the pomps and vanities of the world, and to follow the humble life of Christ. With the whole fervour of his soul he put himself under the yoke of obedience, and seized with alacrity the discipline of a new life; offering himself daily to the Lord as a living sacrifice, to the end that he might quickly attain the highest state of perfection, by the subjugation of his own will.

His father being an influential man and sheriff of Zwolle was very indignant that his son, having become a disciple of Florentius, should have changed to so humble a condition. He therefore sent several friendly messengers, that they might induce him to relinquish his holy purpose, imagining that he had erred exceedingly in foolishly giving up his parents and the riches of the world. But Lubert, being intrepid, remained constant in soul, choosing rather to follow the counsel of Christ than to do the will of his earthly father, because God, Who is greater than man, de-

mands our love before all things, saying, 'He who loveth father or mother more than Me, is not worthy of Me.'<sup>1</sup>

It may seem that in this first decided step which Lubert took in a religious life, he was committing a plain act of disobedience, and wantonly grieving his parents. But it must be remembered that Lubert was now of age to act and judge for himself, and since he had fully purposed in his heart to give himself wholly to the Lord, he probably took the best course, under the trying position in which he felt himself placed, to effect his object. Not disputing about the matter, and to avoid parting in bitterness, he quietly withdrew to a place where he could most thoroughly carry out his holy design. Opinions will differ on such points according to the views which each individual holds. Yet surely parents have duties towards their children respecting matters of this kind, in not obstinately opposing their ardent wishes, if not morally wrong, when they grow up, or forcing them into a position they are unwilling to take up. As, for instance, few would dispute that it is improper and wrong for a father to compel or constrain a son to enter the ministry when he had no desire for it, or to urge a daughter to join a sisterhood, when she had no inclination for such a life; and so, on the other hand, who can doubt the impropriety, if not the injustice, of parents strongly opposing their children, when they come to mature years, embracing a more decidedly religious life, when minded to do so, after deliberate thought? Many heart-rending scenes and bitter animosities in families might be prevented, by parents putting themselves for awhile, as it were, in their children's position, and not unnecessarily or wantonly opposing their wills, though these be contrary to what they have designed for them. Every one, in the main, should have a choice in the kind of life he purposes to follow, if there be no fatal objection which has not been duly considered.

Though in Lubert's case a sad breach was made

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Lub. Bern.* No. v. sec. 3, 4.

between the father and son, yet happily after a time a thorough reconciliation took place, and the father was constrained to confess that his son had done wisely. For it so happened, that after Lubert had been some while at Deventer, his father fell sick and became exceedingly ill, so that he could not speak. And when news of this came to Lubert, with a message that he should come without delay to his father if he desired to see him alive—so that, as à Kempis has it, he who was in extreme necessity might have the benefit of his counsel in obtaining God's propitiation for his salvation—he went without delay to his paternal home, wishing to condole with his sick father in filial love, mindful of our Lord's precept, but unmindful of the injury he had sustained, that he might further the salvation of his soul.<sup>1</sup>

Now he visits him, continues à Kempis, overtaken with sickness, from whose persecution he a little while ago fled, and speaks words of loving kindness to him who had resolutely opposed him. And the Father, upon seeing his beloved son once more, was exceedingly joyful at the sight of him. And wonderful to relate, he who beforehand had been dumb, and deprived of the use of his voice, now began to speak from very gladness. Presently he entreated forgiveness from Lubert, because he had resisted him in the way of God; and the son, overflowing with bowels of love, freely forgave all. The father being then reconciled to the son, now began to exercise sounder judgment, and unwilling to deprive his son of his patrimony, which he had threatened to do when he would not return, gave instructions that all things should be given to him, which fell to him by hereditary right. These things he settled whilst alive, that he might find God when he died, and be faithfully assisted by the prayers of his son.

After a few days his father died, and Lubert, mindful of his love and kindness to him, shed many tears. And when he received his inheritance, it was not expended in satisfying his own desires, but he handed the whole of it over into

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Lub. Bern.* No. v. sec. 3.



the hands of Florentius, to be dispensed in the pious service of the Brothers. Nor did Florentius retain any of that which had been entrusted to him for his own use, but expended the whole in building another House, and defraying its expenses. This is the House notably known by the title of the House of Florentius, which through the favour and consent of the sheriffs of the city was founded for the Congregation of the Devout clerics, in the year 1391.<sup>1</sup>

In the same year Lubert was ordained priest with his friend Henry Brune, a devout man. They were both as it were spiritually twin brothers, having been nourished in the same house with the milk of sacred devotion; and being adorned with many virtues, were deemed worthy to be admitted at the same time to priestly honours; by the world they were deemed honourable by birth, by God they were leaders in the devout life, being humble, temperate, pure, kind, active, fervent, amiable, teachable, simple-minded, and obedient. But now I will endeavour to tell you some exemplary things, says à Kempis, concerning Lubert when he was made priest, which I saw, and which I have often heard from the Brethren.<sup>2</sup>

On a certain day, whilst sitting in his cell writing, Master Florentius sent for him. As soon as he heard this he put down the pen from his hand and rose from his seat. But he was in the last line of the page, and there were but three or four words that remained to be written. Therefore the Brother that was sent for him said, 'Finish that line, and then the page will be complete; there is no hurry.' To this, like one truly obedient, he replied, 'Not one word more, it behoves me to obey.' Behold a new Mark, who will receive a like reward in heaven as he did, concerning whom we read in the lives of the Fathers, that being called by his Abbot he would not complete the letter he had begun. When the business was done for which he had been sent, Lubert returned to finish his work, replenished with the fruits of obedience, even the joy of a good conscience. When Florentius afterwards heard of this prompt obedience of Lubert from the Brother he had sent, he said, 'Ah Lubert, Lubert, how well you

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Lub. Bern.* No. v. sec. 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* sec. 5.

know what is your true gain, and what is for the advancement of your soul!’ He was so diligent in writing, that if any one were talking to him he would write on all the same, and yet be able to keep up the conversation.<sup>1</sup>

On another occasion a certain youth who was in the same house was writing to his parents, and Lubert invited him, while doing so, to sit in his chamber; I being present. Master Florentius came in and said, ‘What are you doing?’ He answered with reverence, ‘My companion is writing to his parents.’ Then our sweet Father said, ‘Write, so that you yourself may be written in the Book of Life.’ Afterwards that youth became a devout ‘Religious.’ And I also, continues à Kempis, forgot not the words of my master Florentius, which he spoke in the chamber of Lubert; because a good man out of the good treasure of his heart always bringeth forth good things. For Master Florentius studied in what he said to the end, that he might speak a word of edification, and Lubert, his disciple, endeavoured in like manner not to neglect the instruction of our teacher, but at once hastened to fulfil it.<sup>2</sup>

Omitting some of the anecdotes which Thomas à Kempis gives respecting his friend, showing the worth of obedience, the example of humility he set, and the value of his quiet, salutary advice,<sup>3</sup> there are a few others related by him, which it will be interesting to record.

There were two clerics talking between themselves concerning Lubert, one of whom said, ‘It seems to me that Master Lubert assumes too austere a countenance, and when I would speak freely to him, I dare not.’ The other answered, ‘If you like, I will speak to him, and he will peradventure amend himself.’ He therefore went to him and said, ‘I want to speak openly to you upon a little matter.’ And he replied, ‘Very well.’ He therefore said, ‘There is a certain manner in you which is offensive; you are too abrupt, and look austere upon those who address you, so that they dare not come to you, and speak with you. You should be more affable and sweeter in your words, so that they may gladly come to you.’ Then Master Lubert humbly responded, ‘I will most readily amend myself in this respect by the grace of God, and I am grateful to you for having admonished me.’ From that hour, adds à Kempis, Master Lubert was changed as it were into another man, and his countenance wore

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Lub. Bern.* No. v. sec. 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* sec. 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* sec. 8, 9, 10.

a joyful aspect towards those who approached him, while still preserving the propriety that was due.<sup>1</sup>

This is a good illustration of the custom that prevailed among the Brothers of Common Life, that if one should see anything amiss in another Brother, he should not hesitate to tell him of his failing. And it is pleasing to notice how thankful Lubert was for the reproof given to him, though he had now become a clergyman and a teacher of others, and how ready he was also to amend himself in any particular that was amiss in his behaviour. Here are some other anecdotes which Thomas à Kempis gives relative to Lubert :—

Once upon a time, when the Brethren were gathered together, Master Florentius interrogated them respecting certain subjects from Holy Scripture. While many of them kept silence, Lubert, because he was the eldest, began to reply. Master Florentius, wishing to humble and to prove him before the others, said to him in a serious voice, ‘Lubert, do you think that we are ignorant of such things, although we are not all Bachelors or Masters of Arts?’ He at once humbly answered, ‘My presumption.’ For he had a custom when he was rebuked for any little fault, never to excuse himself, but rather to confess his error, and would say, ‘My fault,’ or, ‘My negligence,’ or, ‘My inadvertency,’ or, ‘My levity,’ or, ‘My stupidity and idleness;’ or some other like expression, significant of his humility, and that he might edify the Brethren.<sup>2</sup> When he was reading at dinner-time, he would sometimes knowingly make a mistake that he might be corrected by the president of the table; and he would sometimes feign that he did not hear, that he might be more fully corrected, desiring to be put to shame, and to be thought stupid, as if he knew not how to read better. But Master Gerard of Zutphen, who was the president of the table, perceiving that he did not make mistakes from ignorance, but from the virtue of humility, ceased to correct him any more. He had a manly voice, like a trumpet, and read exceedingly well.<sup>3</sup>

One of the Brethren once asked Master Florentius, saying, ‘Why do you not find fault with me and correct me, as you do Master Lubert, and John Kettel, our cook? Might it not be good for me, to be corrected at times, and censured?’ The

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Lub. Bern. No. v. sec. 11.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid. sec. 12.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid. sec. 13.*

pious Father, full of discretion, replied, 'If I saw that you possessed as much courage as they did, I would try you in the same manner. But they are such that they derive profit from reproofs, and do not on this account murmur, but become more humble and more fervent. For they rejoice to be despised and to be reprehended before others.'<sup>1</sup>

Upon another occasion he was standing in the kitchen, assisting the cook, when certain of his friends from Zwolle came suddenly upon him, desiring to pay him a visit. Upon beholding them he was admonished to speak to them, lest perchance he should offend them, if they were deprived of the desired intercourse with him, for they were honourable men, having been appointed city counsellors. Then the humble Lubert, dressed as he was in his linen apron, approached them, and familiarly saluted his friends, not being ashamed to appear before them in his serving habit, but desiring to please God by discharging a post of greater lowliness. After a brief colloquy with them, and having bidden them farewell, he went back to his appointed task, and his friends returning home were very much edified by his humility.<sup>2</sup>

But I must forbear giving other illustrations of Lubert's character, and content myself with some account of the closing scenes of his life. Thomas à Kempis tells us that—

When the plague was raging in Deventer and the surrounding country, many of the Brethren were withdrawn from this life, and as we may piously believe, were joined to those above in the Light Eternal. It happened, also, that Master Lubert was seized with the same plague. And behold, in the month of July, three days before the Feast of the Blessed Mary Magdalene, he fell ill and took to his bed, saying that he was not to continue long in this world. We, on the other hand, laboured with many prayers to God for him, and remedies were sought from intelligent doctors, because his life was very precious to us all. But his prayers were heard beyond ours, and they were full of desires to be admitted among the heavenly citizens. One of the Brethren therefore said to him, 'We shall not be so long separated, but we shall soon hold our conferences (collationes) in Master Florentius's chamber.' 'No,' said he, 'not here any more, but in heaven above with the saints : ' for he had a desire to depart, and to be with Christ. On the Feast of St. Mary Magdalene, he asked that the Sequence, *Laus Tibi, Christe*, might be sung in his room.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Lub. Bern. No. v. sec. 14.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid. sec. 18.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid. sec. 22.*



This Sequence, says Neale, which is one of the most beautiful of the kind called 'Notkerian,' is by Godeschalkus, and runs as follows :—

1. Praise be to Thee, O CHRIST, Who art the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Saviour,
2. Of the heaven, the earth, the sea, angels, and men.
3. Whom alone we confess to be God and Man.
4. Who didst come that Thou mightest save sinners.
5. (Without sin, assuming the likeness of sin.)
6. From the number of which sinners, as Thou didst visit the Canaanitish woman, so also Mary Magdalene.
7. At the same table of the divine Word, Thou didst refresh the one with crumbs, the other with drink,
8. In the house of Simon the Leper, sitting down at the typical Feast.
9. 'The Pharisee murmurs, where the woman, conscious of her sins, laments.
10. The sinner despiseth his fellow-sinner. Thou, who knewest no sin, hearest her, penitent,—cleanshest her, defiled,—lovest her, that Thou mayest make her fair.
11. She embraceth the feet of the Lord, washeth them with her tears, wipeth them with her hair: by washing, by ointment, she anointeth them,—with kisses she encircles them.
12. These are the banquets which are well-pleasing to Thee, O Wisdom of the Father,
13. O Thou, born of a Virgin, Who didst not disdain to be touched by a woman that was a sinner.
14. Thou wast invited by the Pharisee; Thou wast banquetted by Mary.
15. Much Thou forgivest to her that loved much, and repeated not her sin in time to come.
16. From seven devils Thou cleansedst her by Thy sevenfold Spirit.
17. Arising from the dead, Thou didst grant her to see Thee before the others.
18. By her, O CHRIST, Thou signifyest Thy proselyte Church; whom, albeit alien-born, Thou callest to the table of Thy sons.
19. Whom at the feast of the law and grace, the pride of the Pharisees contemns, the leprosy of heresy vexes.
20. What she is Thou knowest; she toucheth Thee because she is a sinner, because she is a desirer of pardon.
21. What, sick one, could she have possessed, if she had not received it, if the Physician had not been present?

22. King of Kings, rich unto all, save us ; Thou that wipest away all the crimes of sinners, Thou that art the hope and glory of saints.<sup>1</sup>

‘When it had been sung, he said, “What devout and fervent words are these !” And he repeated to himself this verse, ruminating upon it :—“What, sick one, could she have possessed, if she had not received it, if the Physician had not been present ?” Many of the “devotees” who were present wept when they heard these things. But he, being joyful in the Lord, consoled them that were mourning.’<sup>2</sup>

Brother Amilius, who nursed him tenderly, continues Thomas à Kempis, heard many edifying words from his mouth, and carefully preserved all things which he said and did ; and wrote an account of them in a letter to the absent Brethren, after his death, setting forth his noble faith, that it might be a memorial to them ; in which the particulars of his happy death are fully made known. These brief records by Amilius are very interesting, and show us how the good Brother met his latter end. Among them it is recorded that at his desire Amilius wrote several letters to his own particular friends, to certain priests and to religious persons at a distance in divers places. He also desired the Brethren living in the same house with him to come that he might speak to them. The scene was most touching. Speaking of his life, and his great purpose to devote himself to God, he acknowledged his many shortcomings, and how often he had offended. And then, with great humility, notwithstanding his debility, he prostrated himself on the ground, and with much abasement and many tears entreated forgiveness from every one of them. ‘O, whose heart could be so hard,’ exclaims Amilius, ‘that he could restrain from shedding tears, when he perceived such a man, the most warm-hearted of Fathers and Brothers, thus humbling himself with tears prostrate on the floor ?’ Then rising from the ground, and

<sup>1</sup> *Jansenist Church in Holland*, pp. 92, 93.

<sup>2</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Luberti Berneri*, No. v. sec. 22.

leaning on his arm, he began again to speak to the Brethren, exhorting them that they should faithfully and heartily preserve unity and love among themselves, and endeavour to live in subjection and obedience; to fraternally correct and admonish one another against vice and evil motions, and not to applaud or approve any negligence or failing. And with many such like words, begging the Brethren to pray for him, he bade them farewell.

A Kempis inserts a copy of the letter which Amilius wrote at Lubert's dictation to Florentius and certain other Brethren then absent, as already alluded to, in which he concludes with the words, 'Farewell, farewell, and farewell until the eternal world dawns upon us, ye whom I shall never again behold in this life.' And then our author proceeds to relate what his friend said respecting Lubert's last moments.

When he had dictated this epistle on the vigil of the holy Apostle (St. James) he sat up, and read it over, to see if he wished to add or omit anything. Then suddenly there fell upon him such a horror and such a weakness, that he seemed to have lost all his strength, and sinking back, laid upon his bed. But immediately after this he began to be agitated with great grief and anguish of soul, so that he cried out with a loud and lamentable voice, and bid me call the Brethren in the house, and all the Devotees outside also, to come and pray for him. When they were come, being greatly afflicted with bodily pain . . . he made a sign to me (Amilius), who never left him, to take away the taper which I had put into his hand, thinking that he was about to die, that we might read with him the seven Psalms,—'for,' said he, 'I shall not die yet.' So he began reading one verse with me, the others making the response, and so he continued all through them to the end with great fervour and devotion.<sup>1</sup>

He had several singular temptations in these last moments. One of these may be mentioned here. He told Amilius that an ill-disposed spirit in the likeness of John Kettel, who had died two or three months before, had appeared to him, and upbraided him with requiring so many prayers from the Devotees and trusting in them so much. And when I ask you that they should repeat the Psalms, he said to me inwardly, 'Why do you confide in

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Luberti Berneri*, No. v. sec. 29.

those Psalms, and in the prayers of the Virgin Mary, St. Gregory, St. Jerome, and the like? They are dung and worthless. You ought to confide in God. God is angry with thee, that thou shouldst confide in them so much, and not trust in Him alone. But because thou art weak and timid, and hast not freed thyself from wickedness, He bears with thee, yet do not such things any more. I, Kettel, did not do so, yet I came to the kingdom of heaven without going through purgatory.<sup>1</sup> And on my inquiring how this was, he subjoined two reasons. One was, because he had for the sake of God and the salvation of his soul renounced the good things of this world and temporal riches, and had undertaken the lowly position of a cook, and had never repented of this renunciation. The second reason was that he had persevered in the office of cook with great fervour and devotion, and with no desire to return to his former state; and that he had remained firm in his resolution and great fervour to continue in such a lowly position and menial office unto death, that he might be servant to all. Then Master Lubert said to me (Amilius), 'Brother, I know that those things which that good-for-naught spirit related to me concerning our faithful and beloved Brother, are true, but whether he came to the kingdom of heaven without passing through purgatory, I know not. And that good-for-naught spirit said to me, that I too should go to heaven without purgatory, and upon my inquiring the cause, he answered: 'For this, because, as the martyrs before God, thou hast placed thy soul at the service of thy Brothers and Sisters, and because of thy fervour and charity thou didst remain with them in much peril of death.' Then Lubert humbly said to me, 'Whether I shall get to heaven without purgatory I know not, but I cannot deny that I did out of charity and fervour remain with the Brethren.'<sup>2</sup>

Why Lubert should speak of the spirit as ill-disposed and good for nought, when he acknowledges the truth of much that was said, it is difficult to conjecture, unless it was in respect of his showing the vanity of some of those practices of prayers to the saints, and dependence upon forms of devotion, which in those days were looked upon as necessary, rather than trusting solely in God—and was

<sup>1</sup> 'Tu deberes in Deo confidere. Deus irascitur tibi, quod tantum confidis in istis rebus, et non in se solo. Sed quia pusillanimis et timidus es, et non fecisti ex malitia, ipse indulget tibi, sed noli amplius talia facere. Ego Kettel sic non feci, tamen sine purgatorio veni ad regnum celorum.' *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Luberti*, No. v. sec. 30.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* sec. 30, 31.



consequently in some degree in antagonism to the superstitious notions that prevailed, and therefore was regarded as coming from an evil spirit. We think that we discover in these allusions an intimation that à Kempis, and other of his more enlightened Brethren, began to doubt the value and the rectitude of some of the superstitious usages which had sprung up in the dark ages, and were still upheld, since they had no warrant in the sacred volume which they diligently studied and tried to follow. One thing comes out very clearly, and that is, that they abounded in charity one towards another, being very mindful of our Saviour's words and example, that they should love one another as He had loved them, since they were ready to lay down their lives for the Brethren, in their service of love; and this was a special mark whereby men were to recognise them to be disciples indeed of Christ. But to return to our story.

After describing his devotions, and other sore temptations that Lubert underwent, he says that after vespers on the same day—

Being entirely worn out, he lay in great tranquillity and peace of heart until near his end. For he ardently desired to be dissolved and to be with Christ, having a firm faith and hope in the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Virgin Mary and the other saints. And in the same ardent desire he continued to pray, to sigh, and to meditate on pious Psalms, especially the Psalm, 'Beati Immaculati,' till the Feast of St. James; often inquiring whether he was near death, and whether he had yet all the signs of death, and the like. And in no wise could we console him than by assuring him that death was not far off. Sometimes with great confidence he would exclaim, 'Oh, when will the Lord Jesus come, and St. Mary with the holy Angels to set me free?' and the like. 'I hope they will not tarry long. Oh, if they would come quickly! Oh, if they would make an end of this! I trust I shall not have to continue here much longer,' and the like. And frequently he invoked St. Mary, Jerome, and Gregory, whom he specially loved, and the other saints to pray for him, and to succour him in the hour of death. And sometimes we spoke to him, and at other times we prayed for him to the Lord in silence, with much grief and compunction of soul, expecting his death.

Thus in much fervour and in much devotion, with an ardent desire to be dissolved, and in an affectionate and trustful expectation of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Virgin Mary, and the other saints, he came to his last hour : nor, as it seems, was the request of his lips denied him. In all his limbs he was already dead, and quite cold ; life only seemed to palpitate on his tongue and in his breast, and he could scarcely move any of his limbs. And, behold, on a sudden, without any help, he sat up by himself ! striking together and elevating his hands, and fixing his eyes upon the wall, he bowed reverently towards it with great devotion ; and, with what strength he could gather in his poor broken voice, he exclaimed, ‘ In Thy glory, in Thy goodness, in Thy mercy, receive me, receive me ! ’ And while thus sitting erect he went over the same words several times, and at length laid down on his bed again ; and twice over he raised himself again, and went through the same actions and words. The last time he lay down he seemed to be in great astonishment and admiration. And I indeed asked the question, and said to him, ‘ Brother Lubert, what is it ? how fare you ? ’ And he replied, as if in a great emotion of delight, ‘ I saw wonderful things, wonderful ! marvellous things, marvellous ! great and marvellous things when I sat up ! ’ And when he had said this, he added immediately, ‘ Call the Brethren, call the Brethren ! ’ And as soon as they were assembled he expired after a short agony, and happily fell asleep in the Lord, full of virtue and of good works, concerning whom God be blessed for evermore. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

There is not much more to add concerning this exemplary devotee.

His body was reverently buried in the cemetery of St. Lebuin, next to John Kettel, his devout companion in the family of Christ, on the south side of the church, where many other Brethren, being buried at subsequent times, rest in peace.<sup>2</sup>

It is only necessary to add that Thomas à Kempis has collected together a few of the devout sayings of Lubert which he places at the end of his life.<sup>3</sup> They are very similar to à Kempis’s own teaching ; and many passages have quite the spirit, the terseness, and point of those to be found in the ‘ *De Imitatione Christi*. ’

<sup>1</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Luberti Berneri*, No. v. sec. 30-34.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* sec. 23.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* sec. 36-41.

As might be expected, Thomas à Kempis could not witness the death of one whom he much loved, and whose life and character he so much admired, without being deeply affected. He had now lost two dear friends within a short space of time—John Kettel, the cook, being the other, and he was shortly to lament the death of another Brother highly esteemed, namely Gerard de Zutphen, of whose life mention has already been made; and no wonder his thoughts took a sadder turn, and he was led again to the contemplation of that great change which every living man must sooner or later encounter. But such thoughts, though mournful and depressing, and which, therefore, worldly people ever strive to banish from their minds, are often greatly sanctified to the welfare of the soul, and fruitful of much good, when devoutly meditated upon. They are like the rains and frosts of winter which moisten and prepare the earth for yielding a more abundant harvest; and we doubt not but that it was so in the case of Thomas à Kempis. He has left behind him a short paper which applies to this afflictive season, and shows how he endeavoured to turn these sad bereavements to his spiritual profit. The title of it is—‘Concerning his being dead to the world whose life is in Christ.’ It is well worthy of being reproduced in this place, and for him who longs after a spiritual life it will be found of great value. The words are as follow, and begin with the text:—

‘Turn away mine eyes lest they behold vanity.’<sup>1</sup> Oh! Jesus, true Life, Life that knows no death, grant me to be consumed with love to Thee, to be wounded with love to Thee, and to die from love to Thee, lest the flesh gain the dominion over me.

I am not yet entirely dead to the world, for the old man still lives in me, stirring up within me various contentions and desires after many evil things; making my nights bitter and my days wearisome.

Oh! when shall it be that I can with confidence say: ‘I also account myself as one that is dead upon the earth?’ For he that is dead cares not for the praises of men, nor the reproaches of the malicious, because he is dead.

He that is dead in the flesh speaks not, smells not, tastes not, and performs no work whatever ; and neither does he listen to the vanity of this world ; nor does he see what is curious and beautiful, nor aught that could tempt him to love anything worthless upon the earth.

And he who is dead to the world is not in the world, but in God, to Whom he lives ; as St. Paul says to his beloved disciples : ‘ Ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.’<sup>1</sup>

He that is thus dead, so speaks about, and so thinks upon, and so sees those things that are without as if they were not ; because that which is seen is temporal and vain ; that which is not seen is eternal and true. Thither then he looks ; after it he burns ; it is in his heart : for this he labours, and to this he longs to attain.

That which he desires, which he loves, which he seeks after, which he tastes, is inward and concealed ; namely, a great good—the chief Eternal Good, of which he can never think sufficiently, because it is too dear, sweet, delightful, and ineffable. Such an one is far removed from things temporal, and sets all his affections upon those that are eternal, keeping in subjection the carnal desires within him.

For sensuality seeks after outward things, desires delightful things, beholds what is present, neglects future things ; avoids whenever it can the bitter and severe, which are oftentimes salutary to the spirit.

Hence it suffers not the spirit to remain in silence, or to pursue things quietly ; but brings before it various vain imaginations, which can scarcely be mentioned, and yet in truth should be regarded as nothing.

But he that hath the grace of spiritual fortitude can at once subdue the immoderate desires of the flesh, singing in the words of Divine power ; ‘ O Lord, my helper, I will not fear what flesh can do unto me.’<sup>2</sup>

Although, therefore, sensuality may contend with him, and the voice of the flesh grumble, he does not readily consent unto it, because the power of the love of God, which giveth him inward comfort, is greater.

He is sometimes so sweetly, so powerfully, and ardently drawn to God, ravished and captivated by Him, that he sees not, or scarce observes, things that are without, and which make a noise in the world ; because he is not there, but elsewhere ; not below, but above, with God, and in God ; Who moveth him inwardly, uplifts and transports him, as it were in a chariot of fire, that he

<sup>1</sup> Col. iii. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ps. cxviii. 6.



may at length happily enjoy Him, in the holy and long cherished desires of his soul.

He is not found abroad, because his Lover hath transported him ; where alone he hears His words, the words of the Beloved ; and rejoices with joy because of the voice of the Bridegroom, mistrusted by him in nothing.

Nor does he forthwith pour out his vial to the sun,<sup>1</sup> to drink in vanity ; but conceals the found treasure, and closes it under a

<sup>1</sup> 'Nec statim effundit in solem phialam suam.' Meaning that he does not expose or tell out to all men his blissful condition, and the treasure and delight his soul hath gotten. The words remind us of the beautiful lines of Keble :—

When Nature tries her finest touch, .  
 Weaving her vernal wreath,  
 Mark ye, how close she veils her round,  
 Not to be trac'd by sight or sound,  
 Nor soiled by ruder breath ?  
 Who ever saw the earliest rose  
 First open her sweet breast ?  
 Or, when the summer sun goes down,  
 The first soft star in evening's crown  
 Light up her gleaming crest ?  
 But there's a sweeter flower than e'er  
 Blush'd on the rosy spray—  
 A brighter star, a richer bloom  
 Than e'er did western heaven illumine  
 At close of summer day.  
 'Tis love, the last best gift of Heaven ;  
 Love gentle, holy, pure :  
 But, tenderer than a dove's soft eye,  
 The searching sun, the open sky,  
 She never could endure.  
 Even human love will shrink from sight  
 Here in the coarse rude earth :  
 How then should rash intruding glance  
 Break in upon *her* sacred trance  
 Who boast a heavenly birth ?  
 God only, and good angels, look  
 Behind the blissful screen—

And alluding to Joseph, who sought where to weep, the poet says :—

He could not trust his melting soul  
 But in his Maker's sight—  
 Then why should gentle hearts and true  
 Bare to the rude world's withering view  
 Their treasure of delight ! \*

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\* *The Christian Year.* Fourth Sunday in Lent.

seal, that the foot of pride may not enter, and all its virtue should be lost.

For thus He says to him : 'Set me as a seal upon thine heart,'<sup>1</sup> and what there follows. Useful is it to seal the heart, and to keep a guard over it, lest perchance the Beloved, Who specially seeks and visits a pure and humble heart, withdraw, and should fly away.

The soul communes with itself upon that, and is astounded at so great a good, which surpasses all understanding, and every gift. Again it is astonished, and anxiously asks, What is this? and rejoices exceedingly, because manna from heaven descends.

Now He who giveth the true bread from heaven, bestows also a good understanding of what is relished, so that the soul knows that every good and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights. 'This now,' says the soul, 'is a word from God. Without Him I have nothing, and all things that I have are from Him.'<sup>2</sup>

Let the reader attentively consider how the soul that becomes dead to the world, to self and its carnal desires, rises to the freshness and beauty, the freedom and brightness of a new life in Christ Jesus. What the world so much dreads, what the natural man so much shrinks from, is the way and the means to attain a higher and happier, and more peaceful, as well as holier condition, than it could otherwise do. In the spiritual as well as in the natural world, it may truly be said 'mors janua vitæ.'<sup>3</sup> For

<sup>1</sup> Sol. Songs, viii. 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Soliloquium Animæ*, ch. viii. sec. 1, 2.

<sup>3</sup> A few years ago some lines appeared anonymously in a monthly periodical which are thought to be worth preserving, and as they seem very applicable to that loss of friends which Thomas à Kempis sustained, and which gave rise to the present devout sentences, they are here given, as they teach us not to dread death as men often naturally do.

A fettered spirit dreading to be free !  
Sight passing strange ! a soul that hugs its chains  
And hates to quit earth's tremblings, and its pains,  
And loves the cloud that wraps in mystery  
All that is worth the knowing. Can it be,  
Since through death only life supremely reigns,  
That man, who here unceasingly complains,  
Dreads to cast off his dull mortality ?  
Death openeth life ! and yet he fears to die.

through death we alone pass to real life. But to continue the words of this most spiritually charming and exalting theme in the words of Thomas:—

Again, the soul is astounded, and complains, wherefore it is that she cares so little for such a great good, with which, nevertheless, she is greatly benefited; wherefore her heart also is not more frequently inclined to hearing and seeing that, than the enjoyment of which nothing can be sweeter or more blissful.

And would that henceforth it might be after this manner. For this chiefly delights me, and will delight me more, if I shall at length dedicate myself to His service.

Let my Beloved come into my heart, that I may eat of the fruit of His apples. Let Him come unto me, and show Himself unto me, and I show myself unto Him. He is my God and my Joy.

Then the soul begins to pant, and desire, and vehemently to love this Good, in which is all good;—this Joy in which is all joy;—this One in which are all things, small and great, the highest and the lowest; and yet it is not of anything of that which is created, but beyond the manner of human conceptions, the beginning and end of all good, created by Him.

Hence, at times, the soul wishes to be filled with all that Good, and flooded with the sweetest joy; and, after a certain manner, craves to be altogether swallowed up, and consumed by Him, so that there may be nothing of herself, but that she may be His only, of Whom are the fire and heat of love, of whom comes this wonderful work, so that the soul may be more eagerly borne up to Him, and be made one spirit with Him.

And yet, on account of this, the soul does not exalt herself, or think that she is anything, or despises others, or judges them as inferior, because this is not her own, but the free gift of God; so that she has no reason to boast when she feels such comfort from Him.

For she seeks not praises, neither does she care for external favours; but seeks her Beloved, for whose praise and favour alone she thirsts; in Whom she has all, and finds more than all else.

And this because she prefers His love and sweetness, and the

What ! would the prisoner, seeing from afar  
The dim light glimmering through his prison bar,  
Not turn upon it a much longing eye ?  
And with the gates wide open would he say,  
I love this gloom, and will not come away ?

joyous fruition of Him, to all things transitory, and longs for and loves Him above all things. Therefore she cannot impute any merit to herself, nor vainly boast of what she has.

He is the true and sincere joy, the chief and only good, the sole object of her desires, and her satisfaction. And much does she wish that others also may rejoice with her, and enjoy such a good unceasingly, now, and in heaven.

For she longs and prays that He would make Himself known unto all men ; and that He would convert and draw all men unto Himself ; that He alone may be praised and glorified, for her Beloved is love itself, and a well of love that cannot be exhausted. He loves all more than He can be loved by all. Yet it is pleasing to Him, when anyone earnestly desires to love Him from the depth of his heart, though he cannot sound the depth of that love, because He (the Beloved) absorbs, conquers, and surpasses all in love.<sup>1</sup>

Such is the blessedness, Thomas à Kempis shows us, of those who are dead to the world, and whose life is hid with Christ in God. With the Apostle Paul we would therefore only add, ' Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded.'

Sad as had been the inroads of death into this little pious community at Deventer, taking away some of the best and most beloved, there were still some few choice Brethren left behind whom Thomas greatly admired, and whose exemplary Christian conduct he thought worthy of being recorded for the benefit of others. In the following chapter, therefore, a further account of some of them will be given.

<sup>1</sup> *Soliloquium Animæ*, ch. viii. sec. 3.



## CHAPTER XIII.

Short memoirs by à Kempis of (1) Henry Brune—A devout priest and friend of Lubert—Humble-minded and zealous for souls—(2) Of Amilius de Buren, the successor of Father Florentius—Though weak in body a great help and comfort to the Brothers, especially in sickness and death—(3) Of James de Viana, a fervent and humble-minded priest—Reminiscences respecting him—The dream à Kempis had of the Virgin Mary, and his being repulsed by her—Another dream or vision of Satan, and how à Kempis drove him away—The seven years of à Kempis at Deventer—Florentius's great esteem for him—How he advises him to choose his future lot—À Kempis decides to enter one of the Reformed Monasteries of the Brothers.

THE biography of great and good men has been deservedly in all ages a favourite kind of reading: and no wonder, since it pleasantly engages the attention, refreshes the mind and kindles new ardour in the soul; it stirs up the languid, gives fresh hope to the faint-hearted, instils confidence into the aspiring, and stimulates one and all to renewed endeavours in the pilgrimage of life. We see how men have lived and toiled and kept some one grand end in view, how much they have made of their lives, by what means they have attained to greatness and goodness of character, and how it has affected other persons: and the reader is led to inquire, Cannot I make more of my own life than I do? Though I cannot attain to the saintliness or the eminence of the men I read about, yet may I not by carefulness, by earnestness, and perseverance, make my life better and greater than it is: cannot I attain to a higher level or standard than I have yet done? I must at once set to work by God's grace and make some vigorous, sustained efforts to amend my life; the attempt, though difficult and against the grain of the old man, will be invigorating: and the acquisition of any degree of advancement, besides the

blessing it brings, will yield me an inward satisfaction, that will well repay me for the trouble I take.

Thomas à Kempis knew well the benefit of this biographical kind of instruction : and besides having in view the desire to keep in memory among the Brotherhood the lives of these saintly men, the early worthies of their community, and the wish to preserve a certain *esprit de corps* among the Brethren in after days, he designed to shew how men in a humble sphere, with small means, might make their lives sublime, rise above the world, and, while discharging with all faithfulness the common duties of life, might live unto God in all holy conversation and godliness.

We see at a glance also the qualities of soul which Thomas most admires, and those characteristics of the new man which he largely adopted in his own practice.

The memoirs which Thomas à Kempis gives are very simple sketches, but drawn with a faithful, loving hand ; and in their plainness they have a beauty which will attract and impress the soul. The circumstances which surrounded those of whom he writes may be different from ours, and their ways and customs not always those which we should follow, but we behold in these portraits the very spirit of the Gospel, the principle of a new life, a likeness to Christ which all can imitate, and to which all should strive to attain. There is not any worldly greatness which dazzles and dissipates the mind, but a nobility of soul which leaves upon the reader a healthy, healing, and elevating influence. We shall therefore give Thomas à Kempis's account of two or three more of the Brothers of Common Life.

I ought not to omit to mention, (says à Kempis, in beginning the narrative of one of them,) a man of great devotion and holy simplicity, and not less a priest of angelic purity. Moreover, it is pleasing to note that he was one of the original Associates, and a most beloved co-presbyter with Master Lubert, and to offer a few words in commendation of him. This is MASTER HENRY BRUNE, the companion of Lubert, beloved of God and acceptable to men, kind to all and burdensome to none. He was born in Holland

of honourable parents and lineage, and was a citizen of Leyden. Esteeming the riches and honours of the world as nothing, he avoided the admiration of his friends, sought the Lord in the days of his youth, and clave unto Him with a perfect heart unto old age. He continued to live obediently in the Brother-house of Master Florentius with all humility and with much gentleness, hearing the confessions of the Devotees, and celebrating the Divine Mysteries with great devotion and reverence ; and without caring for temporal things, he lived in tranquillity and simplicity of heart ; holding intercourse with the Brethren without quarrelling, being had in much esteem throughout all Deventer, and regarded among the Religious in many places as an Israelite indeed, without guile and wickedness, like a dove without bitterness, endowed with singular innocency of life. His eyes were ever towards the Lord, and wheresoever he was able to be alone, he ceased not from prayer and devout meditation.

À Kempis then proceeds to give us an instance of this illustrative of the manner of man he was, for, he continues, sometimes when he sat near the fire in winter-time to warm his hands, he would turn his face toward the wall, and pray secretly during the time, observing a strict silence.

‘When I saw this,’ adds à Kempis, ‘I was much edified thereby, and loved him all the more because of it.’ And he further tells us that he never noticed an unbecoming word proceed from him, nor had he ever heard anyone complain about him, unless it were as to the manner in which he was wont to celebrate the Holy Sacrament. Yet in the manner of doing this he drew many laymen to the devout attendance of it : and indulgence was easily granted by him, because he was unwilling that the penitent should be separated from the beloved Jesus. À Kempis then relates three singular interpositions, which he almost regards as miracles, that happened in the ministrations of this priest for the confirmation of their faith in the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, which we need not here repeat.

Among the other virtues of ‘this pious and devout man,’ à Kempis mentions how humbly he submitted to his superior, ‘giving a good example to the priests and clerics, that they should not, on account of their being in

Holy Orders, elevate themselves above their younger Brethren.' By the permission of Father Florentius he oftentimes on festival-days celebrated the Sacrament among the lepers; 'where I have,' adds à Kempis, 'at such times attended upon him.'

His deep and fervent love for souls is seen in the following little anecdote which Thomas narrates. It happened on a certain occasion when he went with the Brethren to Arnheim for the sake of Indulgences,<sup>1</sup> that being asked for how much or for what he would give his Indulgences, he replied, 'I would willingly give my Indulgences for this grace, that as often as I should speak something good to anyone he should be immediately converted, and amend his life.' The Brethren, says à Kempis, hearing this were greatly edified at this excellent answer, since they saw that it arose from his great zeal for souls in his pious and pure heart. He lived thirty-nine years after à Kempis left Deventer, and died like a faithful souldier at his post of duty. It happened in the year 1439 that the pestilence broke out in Zutphen, where at that time some of the Brethren of the House of Master Florentius had migrated, and there dwelt with many other devout persons. Henry Brune was among the number of those smitten with the pestilence, and he came to his end, says à Kempis, confidently expecting the reward of his labour

<sup>1</sup> This granting of Indulgences is very properly discouraged in the Church of England, because of the errors and corruptions to which it led. Men imagined that the Pope had a treasury of grace, and that he could forgive sins and remit punishment; hence they were led to suppose that they could not only purchase forgiveness for sins past, but for sins to come. There was, however, another view taken of these Indulgences, which was doubtless chiefly impressed upon the minds of 'the Brothers of Common Life;' and this was that, as the angel came at certain seasons to the pool of Bethesda, then the people could obtain miraculous healing; so in the Church special occasions may be appointed when particular mercies may be obtained by renewed repentance; and that it was well to observe these fitting occasions appointed by the rulers of the Church, since our Lord bid His disciples to observe and do all that they who sit in Moses' seat bid them do, though not after their works. For though this ordinance was much abused, and led to much abuse, there were doubtless many earnest souls who regarded it as a special opportunity for stirring themselves up to obtain more grace and favour from God by sincerely looking to Him through Christ their Saviour.



from the Lord. He had performed the priestly office forty-four years, and had far out-lived all those who begun the first fervour of the Institution. He laboured diligently in the work of writing, and yet I have often seen him, adds à Kempis, washing the kitchen utensils and doing other menial works. Moreover, the sacred exercises which he early adopted, he continued until his death; for when he was interrupted by any cause from performing them, or omitted any of them, he quickly renewed them on the first opportunity; and if he became languid in the performance of them he stirred himself up again, as if it were the first day of his conversion.<sup>1</sup> All his 'hours' he read until he breathed his last, nor did he omit the reading of the Holy Scriptures during his sickness, but sought consolation in the written Word of God rather than in the confabulations of men. He died in the above-named year, on the festival of St. Bartholomew the Apostle, and was buried in the cemetery of St. Walburga the Virgin.<sup>2</sup>

We pass on now to the narrative of another of the early members of the 'New Devotion.'

There are two short accounts given by the hand of Thomas à Kempis respecting AMILIUS DE BUREN, of whom some mention has been already made, and who became the successor of Father Florentius in the government of the Brothers of Common Life at Deventer. One of these accounts is here found among the Biographies of the Early Brothers and Fathers; the other is a kind of 'In memoriam' of him, after his death, and is found among the records which Thomas kept of various events, added to

<sup>1</sup> We notice here a striking illustration of the counsel given in the *De Imitatione Christi*, where in one part very nearly the same words are used, which seems to indicate that à Kempis had the pious Buene among others in his mind when he wrote the words: 'Daily ought we to renew our purposes and to stir ourselves up to greater fervour, as if this were the first day of our conversion. . . . If an accustomed exercise be sometimes omitted, either for some act of piety or profit to our Brother, it may easily afterwards be recovered again. But if out of weariness or carelessness we lightly omit it, it is very blameworthy, and will be felt to be hurtful.' Lib. i. cap. xix. 1, 3. Other passages present themselves to the mind.

<sup>2</sup> *Thom. à Kemp. Vita Discipulorum Dom. Flor. No. vi.*

the Chronicles of Mount St. Agnes. From these accounts we learn that :—

When for the purpose of prosecuting his studies he came to Deventer, where Learning at that period greatly flourished, he made so much progress, that in a little time he became one of the first of the more advanced students, and especially pleased the Master by a rare display of ability. But by the grace of God he would not waste these talents in a secular life, nor in the attainment of worldly honours by his learning, since he accounted all these things as dung, in comparison of the favour of God. Being filled therefore beforehand with heavenly grace, and inspired by the Most High, He went to the House of Master Florentius, and, attracted by the piety of his discourses, he yielded himself to the counsel of the Holy Spirit, speaking by the mouth of the reverend Father, who gave to Him admonitions of saving wisdom. Having then left the schools, and relinquished his carnal friends, the humble Brother became a disciple of Christ, and incited many by his example to renounce the world and become servants to Christ. Moreover, he gave himself up to the performance of the most menial works of the house, not sparing his body for the health of his soul, or seeking his own advantage in temporal matters. And for the attainment of the virtue of holy obedience he also undertook the more laborious operations, performing them cheerfully, and faithfully executing what was required of him.<sup>1</sup>

Many were surprised, continues à Kempis, that, with a body not particularly strong, he was able to undertake such labours, which he had not learned in the world, nor had previously been accustomed to, and which scarcely any one stronger would perform for worldly gain. But the love of Christ, and fraternal affection, overcoming all things, he ministered of his strength with a good will, and laboured the more fervently that he might obtain a greater reward. After the death of Lubert and Gerard (probably Gerard Zerbolt) he was so acceptable to God, and to the Brethren, that he was immediately ordained priest, whilst Florentius was still living; and when he celebrated his first mass, Master Florentius arrayed him in his surplice, and was present until he had perfectly and devoutly completed his Office to the honour of God. This man, then,

<sup>1</sup> *Vita Dom. Amilii Buren*, No. viii. sec. 2.

so remarkable for his piety, and for the faithful discharge of all his duties, was also a consolatory friend to all in a time of great necessity, for during the plague he undertook the care of the sick, and was prepared out of obedience and fraternal love to live or die with his Brethren. He it was who intrepidly stood by John Kettel, the cook of the House, and by Master Lubert, ministering to them until the close of life, and to many others laid low by the same disease. He also himself, after many kind services to the Brethren, began to be grievously ill, but by the mercy of God, adds à Kempis, he was restored to the consolation of the Brethren, lest they should have sorrow upon sorrow.

I have heard, says à Kempis, many excellent things from his mouth concerning the virtues of the Brethren which I have written in a book of his labours, as opportunity offered, although I have not expressly mentioned the narrator by name.<sup>1</sup>

He sometimes came to visit the Brethren at Mount St. Agnes, and, saying something appropriate to each, he would exhort them to remain in the holy calling of their order, and to become proficient in virtue. It is truly edifying to speak concerning his good manners, and gracious words, because with a serene face and with eyes steadily fixed before him, he stood as a gentle lamb, not regarding the countenances of those that were around him.<sup>2</sup> Florentius, before he died, placed him over the whole of his congregation, and committed the government of the House to him, as to a beloved disciple. This burden he was very reluctant to accept; for though he did not dare to go contrary to the orders of such a Father, yet with weeping eyes and with much entreaty he protested that he was unworthy to be the prelate.<sup>3</sup> And in secret

<sup>1</sup> *Vita. Dom. Amilii Buren.* No. viii. secs. 3, 4. This is evidently an allusion to one of the many little treatises on holy living, wherein à Kempis intimates that he had living examples before him respecting what he wrote.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* sec. 5.

<sup>3</sup> This term is frequently applied by the Brethren to the Prior or Superior of their Houses, and is so used in the *De Imitatione Christi*, and translated 'Superior.'

he was bitterly distressed and prayed much about it ; for, as à Kempis says, he desired rather to be always a cook, and to serve others, than be preferred to the honour of ruling men. In the former position he felt that he could more safely preserve an humble conscience, whilst in the latter he would have to encounter a thousand dangers, with no little responsibility. But God did not suffer His servant to be long distracted with tears, for he had to bear his burden, à Kempis tells us, but a short time upon earth. For, after discharging the duties of governing the House four years and nearly three months, he received for his faithful labours the reward of eternal rest.

Before his death he gathered the Brethren around him, and, confessing his past offences, prayed them with tears to forgive him if he had in any way offended them. He exhorted them to be obedient to him who should rule over them, as they had been to himself, and to preserve mutual love towards each other. As St. John at the approach of death said to the members of the Church of Ephesus, as they gathered round him to hear his last words, so with his dying breath Amilius de Buren addressed the Brethren :—‘I know nothing more that I can say unto you, unless it be what the Lord said to His disciples just before His ascension : “that ye love one another” as Christ loved you, and pray for me.’ The Brethren all knelt down in prayer ; and, feeling that they were about to lose their beloved Father and Ruler, they all wept bitterly. He was interred in the Cemetery of St. Lebuin, next to Master Lubert, a priest of his House, where James de Viana was buried, and where many of the devout Brethren and Clerics of the Community of Florentius rest in peace. He was succeeded in the government of the House by Amilius John Haerlem ; and left behind him this sweet memorial of his character : ‘He had a passionate love for souls ; he was a kind refector of the poor ; very active in his habits, compassionate to the sick, and a consoler of those in tribulation.’<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See record of events respecting the Brothers of Common Life, added to



I shall now relate what Thomas à Kempis tells us respecting JAMES DE VIANA. He speaks more of his general character than of the incidents of his life ; for our author's aim is evidently to bring out to view the distinguishing graces of the soul, which were pre-eminently admired and extolled by the Brothers ; and which he would have those who came after, diligently to follow ; unfeigned humility, loving obedience, shrinking from honours, deep contrition of soul ; esteeming others better than themselves ; which virtues, as à Kempis has it, 'made their earthly home a paradise.'

Vigorous and refined in manner, James of Viana possessed the great grace of humility, compunction, and interior light ; he strictly examined himself, and often sighed and wept over his daily defects. He also disclaimed as nothing in himself that for which another commended him, fearing the strict account that would have to be given of all he did to the Judge above, Who will not only judge open negligences, but the secret stains of the conscience. Far from his heart was it to be highly esteemed for wisdom, or wish to be reputed a good man, for he was pleased to serve anyone with whom he was connected, and it mattered not whether he were among the least or the greatest. He was a remarkable writer among writers, and showed great diligence in the writing and in the custody of books. When a certain young man sought to be instructed by him in the spiritual life, he at once from humility confessed that he himself was slothful and worthless, and had not yet perfectly attained to the beginning of virtue, but began to recommend certain of the younger Brethren, as fervent and intelligent, from whom he might learn much.<sup>1</sup>

This same young man, à Kempis tells us, on another occasion being in great grief, sought an interview with James of Viana, and told him the distress of his heart, desiring some word of comfort. Upon this James kindly consoled the young Brother, exhorted him to patience, and to wait humbly for the grace of God ; because, as he said, the loving Lord is wont to be present to the contrite in

the *Chronicles of Mount St. Agnes*, by Thomas à Kempis ; also *Vita Dom. Amilii Burensis*, No. viii. secs. 5, 8, 9.

<sup>1</sup> Thom. à Kemp., *Vita Jacobi de Viana*, No. ix. sec. 1.

heart, as the Psalmist says : ‘ According to the multitude of the sorrows in my heart, thy comforts have rejoiced my soul.’ The young man, being much comforted by the counsel of James, would often afterwards call to mind these sweet words that had been said to him, when anything occurred to sadden him ; because, as à Kempis comments, ‘ When human consolations fail, recourse is to be had to the Divine, which must be pondered over, for the great, holy, and chosen have sometimes burdens and disconsolations to bear.’

James of Viana lived a praiseworthy life, and desired to remain in the lowest position, and in the simple rank of a Cleric ; yet, adds à Kempis :—

On account of his virtues and the remarkable gift of humility, he was promoted, by the good pleasure of God and by the advice of Florentius and his Brethren, to the Priesthood. This was, however, to him so serious a matter that he wept bitterly, when he perceived that he must needs be ordained. He confessed that he was too unworthy of such a rank, thinking that they had greatly erred who had given this advice, and had determined to advance, so unfit a person. But the more he humbled himself, so much the more it pleased God, and the Brethren, and the more cheerfully did Florentius promote him. At this time, continues à Kempis, the priesthood was rare and precious among the Devotees. For unless a just person, and compelled for the common welfare, no one dared to accept this Holy Office ; everyone avoided a higher rank, and preferred to remain in a humbler place, and lower office. Wherefore Master Florentius, who was the gem of priests, is reported once to have said : ‘ If I were not a priest, I should not have the care of others, and then I might be able more perfectly to amend myself, since a higher place gives frequent occasions of distraction, from which a good man under subjection is more free, living without the care of exterior things.’

On a certain occasion, we are informed, that when James wished to meditate upon his failings, he secretly ascended a terrace of the House, and, deeply sighing, he wrote down his faults in a little book, lest what he was minded to confess should pass into oblivion. On another occasion, when interrogated by a certain individual concern-

ing the condition of those living in the Brotherhood, he said, 'If anyone desires to live with us, it is necessary that he humble himself and make himself less than all; then such a one has here a paradise, and is contented in the highest degree.'

Florentius found it necessary sometimes to check him, and to recall him to a moderate burden of compunction, lest by too great a rigour he should exceed the limits of discretion. But patiently bearing the rebuke, he humbled himself the more, because he had acted with so little prudence. For his fervid spirit outstepped his natural strength, yet his pious intention excused him, because he sought wholly after God.

After these things bodily sickness assailed him; his strength failed gradually, and, making a good confession, he died shortly before Father Florentius, A.D. 1400, and was buried with his Brethren in the Cemetery of St. Lebuin.<sup>1</sup>

With the memoir of James de Viana, we close the series of portraits which à Kempis gives us of several of the early members of the Brotherhood of Common Life, into which he had been received whilst at Deventer. And we may here remark that there is a difference between them and most of those to whom we shall afterwards allude, which it is desirable to point out; and that is, that those of whom mention has been already made pursued their earnest higher Christian life, while living more or less together, without being bound by any conventual vows. They were not considered essential by these men to the full attainment of spiritual perfection, and we see in their holy lives to what an eminent degree of grace men may attain without them, if only they steadfastly purpose to lead a new life, and try to hallow the common duties and events of everyday life. Though conventual vows were taken by a number of the other Brothers, and by Thomas à Kempis himself, as we shall hereafter see, it was done at first rather from the necessity of their position, and

<sup>1</sup> Thom. à Kemp., *Vita Jacobi de Viana*, No. ix. secs. 2, 3, 4.

that they might form higher centres of instruction and defence for the Brethren generally, than from any idea that there was any greater intrinsic merit or holiness in the monastic life, than might be attained by those living simply as Brethren without making these vows.

Those, however, who did afterwards bind themselves by a solemn dedication to the conventual life, doubtless felt that there was a greater obligation resting upon them to live a life agreeable to their holy estate, and that they should become examples of what those living in monasteries should be. This indeed was one of the objects for which many of them became Canons Regular, and why the monastic system was begun among the Brothers; to shew to those living in monasteries how they ought to live in that state, and to please God. And the result in this respect was very satisfactory, since they not only established many of these reformed monasteries—where many from the world willingly joined them—but the members of these monasteries were the instruments, under God, in bringing about a decided reformation in many existing monasteries, not only in their own country, but in many of the provinces of Germany, and in France, as I hope hereafter to shew; and there was every expectation that it might have led on to greater things, had not the good work been thwarted and undone by an evil influence, that was ever trying to hinder any thorough reformation being effected, no matter from what quarter the attempt was made.

In returning again to the account of à Kempis himself, there are two or three other matters which should be noticed as happening to him whilst at Deventer. First, he is said to have had a singular dream or vision, probably during the earlier portion of his sojourn there. The author on whose authority I give the account states that Thomas à Kempis was accustomed among his other devotions to offer prayers and suffrages to the Blessed Virgin Mary, to whom he was lovingly attached. But, owing to the instability and changeableness of youth, he began to be very lax in performing this pious service; so that step by step



he neglected to say his prayers and pay his devotions to her: first they were omitted for one day, then for two or three, then for four days together, till at length they were forgotten during the whole of the seven days, and at last, most grievous to relate, continues the writer, they were altogether given up. Now whilst this was the case, he saw himself, as in a night vision, standing in the large room in the House of Florentius, where he had come, together with the other disciples, to hear the Divine Word, and as he bent forward with anxious ears to learn what was said, he beheld the Mistress of the world, coming down in the clouds of heaven, with a lovely countenance, and in shining raiment descend into the aforesaid room. She then went round to the Brethren who were listening to the Word of God, which was then being expounded, and having lovingly caressed first one and then another of the young students, she seemed to pour forth her thanks to them, because they were so zealous in attending to the pious admonitions, inasmuch as it shewed that the precious blood of her dear Son was not despised by the young men.

Beholding these things, continues the writer, and seeing the Virgin, blessed among women, warmly embrace the aforesaid Brethren with much tender affection, the youth stood faint with hope, while she still firmly turned away the light of her loving countenance from him, and he said to himself, 'I expect in a little while, when the Blessed Virgin has bestowed the seal of her affection sufficiently upon the rest, she will offer to me also the embrace of love, who, although I am not worthy of her, have still been her loving follower.' But, alas! how often do our hopes fall out contrary to what we wish, for instead of the sweet pledge of love he desired, he received a word of stern rebuke. For the Blessed Virgin, after she had most lovingly embraced each of the others, came to the aforesaid youth, and regarding him with a severe countenance said, 'In vain dost thou seek the embrace of holy love, who from a shameful neglect of friendship hast omitted to pay thy accustomed devotions to me, as thou oughtest. Wherefore

hast thou abandoned thy usual prayers? Has not love grown cold within thee, and thy desire for devotion become torpid, since thou didst adopt this inconstant habit? And now thou standest as if thou hadst not sinned, and lookest for an embrace with a bold face when thou deservest to be censured.' And turning away from him with an indignant look, she said, 'Depart, depart from me, because thou art judged to be unworthy of my embrace, when thou neglectest to pay the easy devotion of a loving soul.' And thus leaving him cut to the quick with merited shame, she disappeared, returning to heaven. Then Thomas awaking from the vision was pricked in his conscience, confessed his fault, and resolved upon amendment. And lest he should be again disappointed in not receiving the embraces of the Blessed Virgin, he no longer neglected to pay his *devoirs*, but diligently attended to this duty to the end of his life, without daring to omit it a single day.<sup>1</sup>

I give the above account, much as it is written, for what it may be worth. There is some doubt, however, about the genuineness of the story, and it should therefore be taken with some reserve; for there is no allusion to it in the short account given by the contemporaneous biographer of Thomas, nor do the other two more ancient writers of his life, Badius and Tolensis, say anything about it, and they certainly had a better opportunity of knowing the veracity of what happened than one living long after their time could do. Moreover, the latter of these two historians being of the same Order with Thomas had, as he states, taken special care to look into the accuracy of all the statements respecting the revered Canon of Mount St. Agnes that had been made by the older Brethren. And if there had been any ground for believing the truth of the above story of the dream, or if it had been currently reported of him during the first hundred years after his

<sup>1</sup> From the book commonly called *Speculum Exemplorum*, extracts from which, relative to Thomas à Kempis, are to be found in Sommalius's edition. *Omnia Opera, T. à K.*, in three volumes, Colon. 1759.

death, he would doubtless have made some mention of it in writing his life.

For, as a writer observes on this matter, 'Either he had heard of it, or he had not. If he had not heard of it—if they of his own College and Order had not then heard of it—if nothing of it so far as appears was to be met with either in their records, or in any of their other writings before the year 1571 at least, as from his total silence is most probable, then, I ask, how came it first to be reported, and then believed, as if it were a true and heavenly revelation? But if it was then already reported, and he had some way or other come to the knowledge of it, then is the difficulty still greater, rather than less. Since if he had in anywise heard of it, he must have looked upon it as fabulous or frivolous, or at best as doubtful. This is plain from the conclusion of his Life, wherein he testifies his care in bringing into it only what he had found to be certain.<sup>1</sup> And if it were not so, no other reason can be produced why it should be omitted by him. The account is indeed very formally dressed up, and circumstantially set off, for the advantage of a practice in the Church of Rome which even the sober among themselves seem ashamed of.<sup>2</sup> But as the relater has not told us of his vouchers, and there be these obvious objections, besides some others that I insist not on, against the truth of the fact, I think we must be of very large faith indeed to lay any stress upon a report of such a nature, that was never so much as heard of till above a hundred and fifty years after the

<sup>1</sup> 'Quæ veterum scriptis eruta, explorata et certa de Thoma habemus.' *Ejusd. Vit.*, Th. Kemp., p. 15. 'De imitando Christo contemnendisque mundi vanitatibus,' lib. 4. 'Auctore Thoma Kempisio, ex latino latiniore facti.' Antw. 1575.

<sup>2</sup> This was written more than a hundred and fifty years ago, and the anonymous writer in a note says: 'In France more especially. Hence the wholesome advice to the indiscreet worshippers of the Blessed Virgin Mary by a wise and pious prelate of the Gallican Church, with mollifying interpretations of Vernon the Bishop of Meaux, and others.' Alas, the worship of the Virgin is openly inculcated and insisted upon too generally in the Romish Church; and in some places she is more worshipped than God or Christ! See also Littledale, *Plain Reasons*, &c., p. 51.

person's death of whom it is told. . . . I commend, however, the diligence of this learned Jesuit, who has given the story about the appearance of the Virgin Mary to Thomas—but herein I praise him not; yet neither do I altogether condemn him, as if in this matter the fraud were his; for it might very well be from some other, and in less than half that time there might be traditionary stories enough of that kind. 'Tis more than probable that there were some such which Tolensis heard and examined, and having done that, rejected, for which he is to be esteemed. This may be thought more than enough concerning the vision of the Blessed Virgin which is pretended, and that which is designed to be inferred from it. Wherefore in one word, as I accuse not the writer of insincerity, so I cannot excuse him from credulity. And after all, whatever authority he might have for such an account, it is but narrated as a dream.' <sup>1</sup>

Moreover, supposing that it had been actually dreamed by à Kempis, might not the narration of it tell in more ways than one? not only in favour of the corrupt practice, as designed to give a reproof from the Blessed Virgin to those who neglect to worship her, but against the practice also, as showing that Thomas during the period of his stay at Deventer did not pay that devotion to the Virgin which he saw the other students attending the public school do, either because he did not conceive it to be needful, whilst he fervently prayed to Christ the Lord and sought His mercy, or because he early had his doubts as to whether it were right to continue to offer prayers to her; and though sanctioned and ordered by the Church at that time, whether it were consistent with the general tenor of Holy Scripture? This might fairly be inferred from his giving up paying his devotion to the Virgin Mary; and that whatever subsequent homage which he yielded to her was given rather in deference to those in authority, or to

<sup>1</sup> *Visio Nocturna*, Rosweyd; see *Life of Thomas à Kempis* by the author whose work Dr. George Hickes recommends, and from which the above criticism is drawn.



the prevailing custom, than from a persuasion of its being just and proper. Mariolatry had not then assumed the gross form it has since done, in putting the worship and adoration of Christ into the shade, and consequently the abominableness of this idolatry was not then so apparent as it is now.

There is another dream that à Kempis is said to have had about this time also, which should not be passed over without notice, though it is of a similar character to the preceding one. And it is this, as we draw from the relation of it by the author, that, once upon a time, during these earlier years of his life, as Thomas lay musing upon his bed, between sleeping and waking, he believed that he saw the Devil appear personally to him in a very hideous form, whereupon he attempted to drive him away, as he had been taught to do when assaulted by bad thoughts from the Evil One, by repeating over the angelic salutation.<sup>1</sup> This he did at first with a trembling voice, for he was greatly afraid. At this the Evil Spirit was but still more enraged, and approached the bed nearer and nearer to where he was lying, as it were to take him away; upon which Thomas became so terrified that he covered himself with the bed clothes, but still more earnestly continued the salutation, till coming to the end of it, when the words OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST were pronounced by him with a loud voice, the Devil, as if thunderstruck with terror at this great name, which is above every name, could not stay any longer, but turned round dismayed, and was constrained to fly away. Now upon this, finding that Satan was not able to stand before the power of the Saviour's name, he began forthwith to take courage, and act with more boldness; so putting his head

<sup>1</sup> The *Angelus*, in which the angelic salutation is thrice repeated, is a sacred commemoration of the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, and contains also some versicles and a collect, which is as follows:—‘We beseech Thee, O Lord, pour Thy grace into our hearts; that, as we have known the Incarnation of Thy Son, Jesus Christ by the message of an angel, so by His Cross and Passion we may be brought unto the glory of His Resurrection through the same our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.’ And it is evidently this form that Thomas used.

out of the bed clothes, and raising himself up, he repeated many times together that most sacred name, Jesus Christ, thereby pursuing the fugitive enemy ; who the more precipitately fled away, the more strongly Thomas called upon the Lord Jesus, as the great captain of our salvation, before whose invoked presence he could not stand. Rejoicing over this great deliverance, as it appeared to him, the godly youth immediately returned thanks to God, and said within himself, ' If by this most holy name Jesus, I can so easily baffle and discomfort the powers of hell, from this time forth I will not be, as hitherto I have been, so fearful of the plots of evil spirits, or waver in my faith, let them rage ever so much against me, and threaten my ruin.' Wherein it appears pretty evident, whatever this transaction might be, that his sole refuge and help was placed in Jesus, and in no other whatsoever.<sup>1</sup>

Whether Thomas à Kempis really did dream such a dream or see such a vision, we have not sufficient authority for determining : and there is not much necessity to consider the matter. Nor is there any need to enter upon a discussion of the nature of such like dreams and visions. I would simply remark that, if he ever had such a dream it is evident that with the Scriptural truth, viz. the active personality of evil spirits, he had mixed up in his mind the superstitious notion which formerly prevailed, that the Evil One appeared in some hideous form. It may be that this foolish idea having been intermingled with the truth, has made it to appear so imaginary and ridiculous that many persons, not being able to distinguish truth from error, have eschewed one with the other, and have brought themselves to believe that the existence of evil spirits is but an idle dream, a mere fable or tale wherewith to frighten weak-minded people, notwithstanding the Bible so constantly bids us to be on our guard against them. Waiving the superstitious notion that is mixed up in the above story, there is ample evidence to shew that à Kempis

<sup>1</sup> From the book commonly called *Speculum Exemplorum*, pp. 24, 25, sec. 8.

firmly believed in the existence of the Devil and other evil spirits, and did faithfully inculcate great watchfulness against them, and an undying opposition to their insidious allurements and fierce assaults. See 'De Imit. Chr.' lib. i. 13, lib. iii. 6, and 'Doctrinale Juvenum,' ch. viii. sec. 2.

Thomas à Kempis continued at Deventer about seven years ; and from being only a scholar in the public school under Boehme, assisted by the Brothers of Common Life, he came to be regarded as one of the Brothers also himself, and to take his place as such among them, adopting their habits and mode of life, and gradually imbibing the spirit and principles which pervaded them. Naturally inclined to a quiet, contemplative, and interior life, and having from childhood been enured to the hardier virtues of the Christian life, he heartily entered upon the self-denying, unobtrusive, and godly course of living which they pursued ; and with all the fresh fervour of a young disciple he sought to advance in the grace and devotion for which they were worthily esteemed. Constantly through his writings do we gain a glimpse of that peculiar spirit of the new life which had developed itself, and which is more or less present on the awakening of true religion among men ; for the best form of practical mysticism was manifest, which consisted in that constant training of the soul, and bringing it daily more and more into conformity to the image of God as reflected in the Person of Christ Jesus, a resting in the consciousness of His presence and favour, with, what is specially said of à Kempis, 'a quiet throbbing of inward happiness and tranquil content which diffuses its genial warmth on every side.'

It must not be supposed, however, that his advance in grace and holiness at this time was unattended by any earnest endeavour, that all came easily to him, that there was no serious struggle on his part to attain to this higher standard of living, that it all came naturally, and that he did not feel his constant need of Divine help. It is true that as he grew in years he grew in grace and in the knowledge of Divine things, but it is true also that it was by

perpetually striving against the sinful and carnal desires that rose up within him, and by tenaciously keeping hold of God, and seeking His aid through the various means of grace. Life was opening out to à Kempis, when the lusts of the flesh, and all that is in the world, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life became strong within him : and these beset him and sought to take hold of him, and to bind him down. These he had to combat, and over and over again had with resolute vigour to keep in subjection, and in place thereof to welcome and cultivate all those desires and efforts which contributed to a higher and purer life. That there was many a conflict between his soul and the carnal desires of the old man within him is evident from what he says. Let one passage alone suffice from the well-known work of his, when in earnest prayer he cries out :—

O Lord my God, Who hast created me after Thine own image and likeness, grant me this grace which Thou hast shewed me to be so great and so necessary to salvation, that I may overcome this most corrupt nature of mine, which draws me to sin and perdition.

For I feel in my flesh the law of sin warring against the law of my mind, and leading me into captivity to obey in many things the sensual appetite ; neither can I resist its passions unless Thy most holy grace, ardently infused into my heart, assist me.

There is need of Thy grace, and of great grace, that I may overcome my nature, which always was prone to evil from my youth.<sup>1</sup>

That he sought after this grace of God, and followed hard after God, trying earnestly to keep His commandments with his whole heart, during this period of his stay at Deventer, is corroborated by the testimony of the contemporary biographer of à Kempis, who states that ‘in him were fulfilled the words of the Prophet, which says, “Blessed is the man who hath borne the yoke of the Lord from his youth !”’

À Kempis began to realise the great advantage it was

<sup>1</sup> *De Imit. Chr.* lib. iii. cap. lv. 1, 2.



to him to live as one of the Brothers of Common Life. It afforded him sweet companionship with men of like mind, pilgrims like himself on the heavenly road, some of them indeed older and more experienced than he was, but he gained much valuable wisdom and encouragement from them. They were living by rule, a higher rule than ordinary Christians, subjecting themselves to a harder discipline, and renouncing many things voluntarily which are lawful in themselves ; in this more noble life he had joined them, and was strengthened in his endeavours to keep up with them and to persevere like them by their presence, and from being associated with them. Their very company and society formed, as it were, a hedge round about him to protect him from many seducements to evil, and to guide him into the way of peace. He felt freed from anxiety about providing for his future support, and had abandoned the desire to accumulate a store of this world's goods, since in the Brotherhood there would always be a supply for his real wants. And while he strove to live as they did, labouring to support the Community, which was maintained at a little cost, he felt happy in joining them in providing for the wants of others, in promoting the welfare of more needy Christians, in assisting those who were struggling with difficulties, and even in welcoming among them for a time those who were weary of the strifes and vanities of life, who were thirsting for a draught of the pure water of life, and seeking to resuscitate their strength in God, ere they sallied forth again into the world to fight the good fight of faith. À Kempis was not only satisfied, he was thankful and happy ; the more ascetic and sterner life seemed to brace and invigorate him, as if he was walking on a loftier level, and breathing a purer atmosphere.

When à Kempis had been five or six years at Deventer, Florentius appears to have received him into his own House, where he resided with a larger number of the Brothers to what dwelt in the other House where Thomas had been living. A strong affection had sprung up in the breast of Florentius for à Kempis ; for he was a young man after his

own heart, and he used to regard and speak of him as his own son in the faith. The days of Florentius seemed now to be numbered ; he had been fast ripening for heaven ; to all about him he seemed as if he were not long to be with them, for even now he appeared as if he was ready to spread the wings of his soul, and fly away to the realms of eternal bliss. À Kempis regarded it as a peculiar privilege to be brought into closer contact, and more intimate fellowship with such a saintly man than he was wont, and gladly ministered to the necessities of his beloved Master. Many opportunities had he of listening to the devout breathings and pious words which were uttered in hours when Florentius was withdrawn by sickness from active life ; and his earnest teachable mind readily opened itself to receive the finer touches of spiritual influence, which were likely to emanate from such a man in such moments.

Many months passed away in this closer and familiar intercourse ; and Florentius might naturally have desired to keep by his side still longer a young man of such rare simplicity and piety, and who gave such promise of devotion to God ; and the more so, since Florentius had become so infirm, and seemed to need the sympathy and attention of some such a loving, tender soul as that of à Kempis near him. But this true saint of God thought not of himself, nor heeded what his natural likings or affections might be, but considered only what would be likely to promote the welfare of the individual he loved, and the glory of God. It will be remembered that à Kempis, in concluding the life of this spiritual Father, makes allusion to the number of persons Florentius, having trained and confirmed in the Christian life, had sent forth to various places, to further the work of bringing souls anew to God, and building them up in the life of Christ ; Thomas was one of the number, and now the time had come for him to make his deliberate choice for life, whether or no he would give himself in this way wholly to God, and go forth to other parts to do Him service.

And so it came to pass, as we learn from one of the

old biographers of Thomas, that upon a certain festival, the Divine rites being performed, Florentius, having observed that his pupil Malleolus (another name as will be remembered given to Thomas à Kempis) was more cheerful than usual, called him to come to him into his bedroom, and thus began to address him :—‘ O Thomas, my son, most dear in the Lord, the time approaches when you must determine your future career, when and what sort of person you are to be, and what kind of life you wish to follow. For you are now approaching to the place where two ways meet, alluded to in the Pythagorean teaching. You see how many sorrows there are in the world, how many snares, how many dangers and evils, that can with difficulty be avoided. And if perchance anything seems pleasant and delightful in it, how quickly that which is pleasant passes away, while the sorrow which follows it is eternal. . . . For it is appointed unto all to die, and we know not when. So many fates hang over us, as it has been truly said :—

Nemo tam divos habuit faventes,  
Crastinum ut posset sibi polliceri.

For, as another author sings :—

Quis scit, an adjiciant hodiernæ crastina vitæ  
Tempora dii superi ?<sup>1</sup>

And beware of hoping that when you are dead any more time will be granted you for salutary repentance. For the angel hath sworn by Him Who liveth for ever that time shall be no longer. According to what is written “if the tree shall have fallen to the south or to the north, into whatsoever place it shall have fallen, there it will lie.” Nor is that difficult to believe, since hereafter there will neither be any expulsion from heaven, nor any redemption from hell ; for there is a necessity, that into which of the two we may at last be brought, there we must for ever remain. But woe, eternal woe, to those who are brought to hell ! Because he who shall be punished there with the least torment—where none are little—will endure severer things,

<sup>1</sup> Horat. *Carm.* lib. 4, Ode 7.

than if he alone from the creation of the world to its end should bear all the torments of every living soul.

‘Wherefore the most merciful Redeemer of our souls—Who is most zealous for them, says,—“What profit is it to a man, if he should gain the whole world, and verily suffer the loss of his soul?” or, “What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” Therefore He often admonishes us that we should watch, because we know not the day or the hour; which out of the abundance of His mercy He has so arranged, lest, if we should know the hour, we should delay to be converted to Him. Let us therefore be converted, whilst we have time, from our very heart; and happy those who do so from tender years! For it is good for a man, when he has borne the yoke of the Lord from his youth, to make a holocaust of himself to God, and burn the whole, the head with the tail; lest having given the flower of his life to the world, the flesh, and the Devil, he should offer to God only a worthless tail.

‘But there is—as I have received it—a twofold way leading to salvation; the one active, which is the way of those who seek to gain Christ by good works; the other of contemplative persons, who sit with Mary at the feet of Jesus, whose province is more acceptable to God, and more useful to themselves. For by the definition of the Lord, Mary chose the better part, which shall not be taken from her. But whichever you shall choose, it will be safer and more strictly carried out in the cloister than in the world. For the whole world lieth in wickedness, is full—as it seemed to Antony—of snares, and covered with the thorns of riches; and to such an extent, that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the heavens. And do not suppose that cloistered persons languish in idleness. For it is a great undertaking to pray and to praise God assiduously, to fast frequently, to reduce the body into subjection, to watch, to break your sleep, and at the same time to engage in manual labours; wherefore do not imagine that these persons are deprived of the reward of an active life. For



they are like infirm men left with the baggage, who, if they pray for those that fight and strenuously work, will share alike with them ; and the part of him who goes up to the battle, and of him who remains with the baggage, will be equal. This is the law decreed by David the Great, and shall remain for ever.

‘ Listen, therefore, to what the Lord says :—“ If you wish to be perfect, go and sell all that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me.” Nor say, “ I have nothing, Father, to sell.” For you have yourself, you have a body, you have a will ; offer these to God, and He will give you the reward of the kingdom of heaven, since all things are His, and not in name only. For, as the sweet Bernard most truly says, “ Do we not owe ourselves and all our possessions to Him, by reason of creation, and of so copious a redemption that not even one drop of blood remained in Him ? What love to us—so immense that He laid down His life for His enemies by the death of the cross ! What liberality—so great, that to those who but hardly give themselves and the things that belong to them, He should restore a hundred-fold, and in addition should confer eternal life ! ” Nor do I doubt but that you are of a benevolent and grateful disposition to One Who is so extremely deserving of us.’ ‘ For,’ continued Florentius, ‘ I have often observed in you the indications of love. But perhaps you will ask to be informed what order of religious persons I would most strongly recommend, for there are very many, and all good. But among these, that which has been founded among us seems the best, which our most excellent father, Gerard the Great, left to us when dying, as the most commendable, viz. that of the Canons living under the rule of the godly Father Augustine ; and of this Order—as you know—we have lately erected two Colleges (collegia).’

To these things the most excellent young man, Thomas, says the historian, was able after awhile to mutter with trembling voice : ‘ For some time past, Father, I have now desired this with many prayers, even hoping for the

opportunity which you give me. Since I have a brother-german in Windesheim,<sup>1</sup> I would that your love would cause that I may find a place among the very dear disciples in Mount St. Agnes.' 'I will try,' said Florentius; and on the following day he gave him letters to the principal of the convent.<sup>2</sup>

Then, as we are told concerning Thomas, having received the letters, the most excellent young man hastened to the appointed convent, having after the Apostolic manner followed the Lord when first He called him, so that he might not peradventure hear that sentence, 'I have called and ye refused,' or that other, 'Thou shalt call upon me in prayer, but I will not hear thee, because thou hast refused to hear my voice.' Therefore he took the admonition of the poet as applied to himself, 'Avoid delay; for it always injures those who are ready to put off;' or that saying of the prophet, 'To-day, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts'—because the Jews did so, and did not receive Christ, and he knew how very ill it had gone with them.<sup>3</sup>

Thomas à Kempis was thus sent from this sweet and pious community, where he had enjoyed exceptional privileges, to take up a more advanced post in the Brotherhood. From being a disciple or learner in this school of the prophets, he was now to become a leader, or active and foremost labourer in the vineyard of the Lord, and to bring forth fruit through his service; from being a member of the Congregation of Brothers, he was about to become one of the Canons Regular; from being in the place of one who was taught, and had received good impressions from others, he was now to be an example and teacher to others,

<sup>1</sup> John, his brother, had left Windesheim some time before this, first to be Prior of the monastery called the Fountain of the Virgin Mary near Arnheim, and from there he had been but lately transferred to, and made the first Prior at, Mount St. Agnes; the meaning of what he said was probably, that his brother was in the confraternity of Canons Regular belonging to Windesheim, which was the mother House.

<sup>2</sup> Badius Ascensius, *Vita R. P. Thom. à Kemp.*

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., *Vita R. P. Thom. à Kemp.* chap. xii.

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to impress upon them the value of a religious life, and endeavour actively to promote in the hearts of those around him an entire devotion of themselves to Jesus. This marks an important change in the life of à Kempis, to which attention is here drawn, because I shall have shortly to notice the various ways in which he fulfilled the special mission or work he was called upon to undertake.

## CHAPTER XIV.

Some account of the Reformed Monasteries—The Windesheim Order of Canons Regular—Projected by Gerard before his death—Established by Florentius with the help of others—The toil and hardship of the first members—Their austerities carried to excess—Two sad instances—New regulations to prevent such cases—Attention to spiritual exercises and cultivation of the Interior life—A new version of the Bible undertaken—These Reformed Monasteries centres of Gospel light—Promotion of a more liberal education—The joyous character of their religion—The fame of their Christian excellency and loving fellowship attract many—Other monasteries established—Mount St. Agnes, the one à Kempis entered—The blessing of these Houses set forth in the Epilogue of Buschius.

BEFORE accompanying Thomas to his new home at Mount St. Agnes—where he remained to the end of his life, with one or two exceptions—I must go back a little to give some particulars respecting the origin of the new community of Canons Regular with whom he was to live, its connection or relation to the Brothers of Common Life, and how it differed from them as hitherto represented, though it formed an integral and leading part of their religious scheme.

When Gerard the Great lay on his death-bed, and his sorrowing disciples were standing around him to catch his dying words, he gave instructions concerning the formation and establishment of a monastery of Canons Regular of the Order of St. Augustine. The design had been in his mind for some years previous, but untoward circumstances had prevented its being carried out. Just before his illness, as already alluded to in the brief sketch of his life, a way to the consummation of his wishes was marvellously opened to him ; he was just permitted to behold the means for the accomplishment of his desire laid at his feet, when he must leave the work to be carried out by others. It happened



as one, who in modern times most resembled him, and who carried on another evangelical work in a like spirit, once fitly said, 'God buries His workers, but carries on His work.'<sup>1</sup> But though he had considered the matter well over, and had matured his plans in his own mind, he had not fully communicated them to those about him. He had felt that some other safeguard was necessary for the well-being and protection of the several institutions of the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life, which now existed in several places, and of those which were likely to spring up in other quarters. He seems to have looked forward to the time when he should be taken from them ; and he feared that when this should be the case, and he was no longer able to defend the societies, their enemies would again attack them, and that they might be more easily broken up, and the Brethren dispersed ; or it might be that divisions or disaffections, or disorders of one kind or another, might arise among them, which might lead to their disintegration, or gradual decline, and they would fall away from their original purpose—from the purity and holy ardour with which they started, as many other like religious bodies had done. And as far as human means and provisions could do, he wanted to prevent this.

If then, he considered with himself, there were some central authority of higher standing to which they would be subservient, and to which they could appeal for support and counsel in cases of emergency, and if this authority or supreme power over all the communities were centred in a well-ordered religious body, sanctioned by the ecclesiastical rulers, there would be a better chance of keeping the Brothers together, that they would be less likely to be corrupted by the evil influences from without, and at the same time would be sheltered from the malicious machinations and assaults of the mendicant Friars, and other people who had no kindly feeling towards them, than if they were left to themselves. To this end, therefore, he gave instructions for the organisation of the

<sup>1</sup> John Wesley.

Order, which Thomas à Kempis afterwards joined, and the way in which it was to be carried on ; how some of the more earnest and devoted spirits among them should be selected to enter this Order, and that these pious men, having chosen a head or ruler, should be an example, and a governing body to the others, a higher kind of Brotherhood, to which the devout of both sexes might look, as their guardians and superiors, and from among whom they might always find some one or other of devout mind to rule over them, and take the guidance of the several institutions which were spreading over the land. They were to receive into their monasteries as well as into the Congregation of the Brothers, as hitherto, such devout persons as were converted to God, and were inclined to follow the Common and Apostolic life ; so that, in addition to the Canons Regular, men should be admitted of like grace who might follow some secular calling, and others of good character that might be associated with them.

Such was the design which Gerard the Great had in his mind, as he was drawing to the end of his life ; having briefly explained his views, he thus addressed Florentius, and the other Brethren that stood around him, and among them was John à Kempis, the brother of Thomas :—‘ For this cause I ask you, one and all—and I charge you before God—that after my death ye will construct a monastery such as I have named, and that ye will settle such of the Brothers in it as are willing and have an eager desire to dwell there, and who, with a number of others of like mind, are ready to undertake the execution of it ; so that all the devout and religious everywhere throughout the whole region may dwell securely under the shadow of their wings.’ And after a few more words to the same purpose, he ceased speaking.<sup>1</sup> Then the sorrowing and listening Brethren hearing these things had their hope in the Lord revived, and were truly comforted by this kind

<sup>1</sup> J. Buschius, *Chronicon Windesemense*, lib. i. cap. v. p. 22. Antw. 1621.

of discourse ; and kneeling down they commended themselves and this especial work to God in prayer.

And because Gerard had earnestly commissioned them respecting the subject of taking upon themselves an Order approved by some of them, they anxiously interrogated him, and inquired 'whether he would recommend them to take upon themselves the Order of the *Carthusians*, which they had heard was almost the only one in their part of the world which was reformed.' 'No,' he replied, 'not that Order by any means. Its members, indeed, as holy men should be, are everywhere distinguished for their holy and strict lives, but they are too much withdrawn and separated from mankind. All devout persons should be able to have free access to them, just as it will be always right to have free access to those Brethren of yours.' On this they went on to ask him, 'should they take upon themselves the Order of the Cistercians, which at that time was, next to the *Carthusians*, eminent for strictness among the Orders.' 'No,' he answered, 'I should not recommend you to take upon yourselves this Order. It is one of considerable severity, and one which not everyone can bear in this our day. But there is another Order, the Order of Canons Regular. That is one which subjects itself to a more indulgent rule—one which is fairly suitable to almost all who wish to serve God strictly in the state to which He has called them. Take that upon yourselves, and the sooner the better, because it does not appear to differ very much from your already devout conversation, except in this point, that its professed members observe under promise and vow, charity, and the three essential obligations of the Order, while you observe these things without any vow. For you, Priests and Clerics, and your Sisters of *Béguines*, can take none into your Societies who (though they make no solemn promise in the matter) slight the observance of chastity, giving up of their own property (*viz.* poverty), obedience, and, above all, charity, and who will not submit to labouring with their own

hands.’<sup>1</sup> And having appointed Florentius as his successor, to have the direction and the chief control in carrying out the founding of his new monastery, as well as to be the general ruler of the Brotherhood ; and bidding the Brethren attend to his instructions as they would to his own, that they should highly esteem him, and regard him as a father, he shortly afterwards fell asleep in Jesus.

As it has been already seen, a more worthy successor could not have been found by Gerard than Florentius. And we must see how he carried out the design of Gerard, in the same grand spirit in which it had been conceived. And in giving some particulars respecting its foundation and the manner of life which was there followed out, let it be remembered that we are speaking of the mother institution, from which the Monastery of Mount St. Agnes, where Thomas à Kempis lived, and others of a like kind emanated, and after which they were modelled. In speaking of the first institution of these monasteries, the Chronicler of Windesheim says, ‘ That most fervent priest of Christ, Father Florentius, Rector of the Congregation, Father John de Gronde, and other Clerics and Brethren of our House, entertained the hope that they should be able to reform, revive, and make the ancient status of regular obedience, and the discipline of a spiritual life to flourish again. . . . They therefore began, where all ought to begin, by sanctifying their souls beforehand unto God.’ And this they did by renewed confession of sin, deep contrition, and a fresh renunciation of the world and all its vanities, so that ‘ the Eternal Lover, the Bridegroom of the soul, the Lover of purity, might find nothing among them that should offend the eyes of His Divine Majesty.’<sup>2</sup>

The place which they chose for the site of the monastery, as indicated by Gerard, was a waste and uncultivated spot lying between Deventer and Zwolle, and was afterwards called Windesem or Windesheim. The name was held to be significant of the purpose to which the place had

<sup>1</sup> J. Buschius, *Chron. Windes.* lib. i. cap. v. pp. 22, 23.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* cap. xii.



been devoted, for, as Buschius tells us, the name was interpreted to signify, 'the Wine of the Eternal God,' and 'the City of Virtues.' A few of the Brethren went forth from Deventer, and were joined by other persons, pious laymen and labourers, and the work was begun in faith, and carried on amid many hardships. Their conveniences and shelter were of the roughest kind, their fare coarse, and their labours arduous. A beginning was made, however; a place was cleared in that lonely and wild spot, on the level tract of land which extends for some distance in this part of the country. It was not a barren soil, but it had not been cultivated; the foundations of the monastery were laid, not without many prayers, invoking the special blessing of God on the undertaking, for it was one of more than ordinary interest to those concerned in it. Slowly and steadily the work proceeded until a few cells were completed, and a fitting place for the worship of God erected; and then, though all was as yet rough and there was much to do, there was no reason why a few of the Brothers, who were designed to take upon them the Order of Canons Regular, should not at once have possession of the place, and go on furthering the work, while they otherwise prepared themselves for the institution of the Order, and their being received into it. This was accordingly done, and in 1386, two years after Gerard's death, the monastery was opened according to the last and dearest wish of their founder. Many friends came forward to help on the work. William, Duke of Gelders, gave his countenance to the undertaking, and several opulent individuals supported it by endowments of landed property; and the same Bishop of Utrecht, Florentius de Wevelinkhoven, who had once interdicted Gerard from preaching, gave his sanction and approval. Among the first six Brethren who were chosen to dwell there, were Henry de Huxuria, the Father and Rector for the first year before they assumed the habit, Henry Wilson of Campen, who was the first Procurator, 'a prudent and eloquent man, and very expert in temporal matters,' and John à Kempis, the brother of Thomas.

But though they had several kind friends, and obtained some assistance in the work, it must not be imagined that the early dwellers in this monastery had an easy and luxurious time of it; very far from it. Much remained to be done, for they were content to begin in a small way, and to proceed as time and means and help were afforded. In speaking of the zealous labours of the Brethren on the first founding of the monastery, the Chronicler of Windeheim tells us that, though fervently engaging in the exercises of religion and never permitting themselves to neglect the service of God, yet did they rise up from sleep very early for the sake of writing portions of the sacred Scriptures; and very many of the clerics engaged during the day in manual labours, the labours of artisans to which they were unaccustomed, that they might accelerate the completion of the buildings which were needed. It was not an uncommon thing to see three, four, or five, and six, of the professed Brethren carrying materials with their own hands or on their shoulders, to help on the construction of the walls of the monastery and outbuildings, bringing stones and cement up to the proper level needed for the masons; others mixing lime with the water, and working it into a consistency for use, or engaged in some other useful operation. 'Even the Father and Rector of Windeheim,' continues Buschius, 'our Brother Henry de Huxuria, learnt to square and fashion stones for the doors and windows, and arrange them in order according to the prescribed rule. And indeed he ceased not till the end of his days to give up his spare moments to hew, chip, and plane, with the axe and hatchet, wood for posts, benches, and other similar things for the various uses of the Brethren; labouring with such exertion that he was frequently observed to be bathed in perspiration.'

As the work went on little by little, and one cell after another was added, and fresh accommodation of a plainer sort was made nigh at hand, other Brethren joined them and many lay Associates, who desired to live in communion with them, though they did not take upon themselves the

habit of the Order. And so the number began gradually to increase, and the place to assume a more attractive and habitable appearance.

All were sedulously and continually employed, says the chronicler, in diligent labours. None took their ease, and the precious moments were not allowed to pass idly away without yielding their due fruit; only the very old and those feeble in health were excepted from the rule; but these were engaged the more intently in prayer whilst reposing in quiet. Other Brethren frequently undertook humble and arduous works, as they were deputed thereto according to the requirements of the monastery; some assisted in the kitchen, washing pots and dishes; others in washing and cleaning the clothes of the Brethren; others in making bread, or brewing a certain kind of liquor which they drank; while others were occupied in outdoor labours, making implements, working in the field, or cultivating the garden.

And, continues the writer, although our Brethren were thus incessantly occupied, particularly in bringing the buildings of the monastery to a completion, yet did they keep most diligent watch over their hearts and feelings, and whenever they were able they anxiously seized upon a few stolen hours for writing sacred books for the common use.<sup>1</sup>

They were also remarkably abstemious, even to a fault, so that it needed an entire correction. 'Who can enumerate,' says the chronicler in another place, 'the labours, the fatigue, the inconveniences, and the deficiency in food and drink, and in all necessary things, which the first Fathers, with the Brethren and Associates living at Windesheim, most patiently endured. For nothing could as yet be found in this waste and desert spot but what the hands of the devout faithful brought forth; hence they were accustomed to receive their bread, and pottage, and drink, by weight and measure.' This they had, however, learnt to do formerly in the House of Florentius, where

<sup>1</sup> *Chron. Windes.*, lib. ii. pp. 283-5.

each individual had his portion of food and drink assigned to him ; ' lest,' as the writer says, ' by living too luxuriously and nourishing the flesh, the spirit of devotion should be extinguished.' Moreover, the necessities of the monastery did not permit them to obtain more and better food. In the first fervour of their spiritual life they allayed their desire for better food than that which was provided for them ; and when they must needs eat they did not relish their food the less because it was poor and meagre ; for it made their ' olera,' their ' pultes,' and their ' legumina ' to be all the more savoury. ' For pleasure is brief,' he says, ' where great poverty reigns.' Three days in the week they were allowed to eat flesh, and on three other days they had eggs, and food prepared with milk, and on Friday they used to take the Lenten food, in the refectory. They never had roast meat, but had the meat either boiled or stewed with vegetables ; and it was ordained as a rule for perpetual observance among their sons and descendants in the Houses associated with them, that they must never eat so as to provoke the carnal desires within them ; for, observes the writer, as soon as we are drawn to this state, we must begin to restrain the pleasures of the body, or we shall immediately lose spiritual delights and the taste of divine sweetness.

Great abstinence was thus for a long time regarded as a holy rule among all the devout Brethren in the monastery and the Congregations. But in course of time, continues Buschius, they learnt by sure experience that the rigour of the Order must be moderated ; for the unwearied labours of those who daily continued to frequent the choir for chanting at the canonical hours—their sacred exercises of internal devotion being accompanied with the frequent fatigue of external labour—far exceeded the strength of the aforesaid Fathers ; and the Brethren openly recognised the fact that their corporeal and spiritual strength could not be maintained in substantial health with so much abstinence and retrenchment as they observed. In the sketches of the lives of some of the Brethren given by



Thomas à Kempis it has been noticed, how the excessive fasting and subjugation of the body proved detrimental to the preservation of their health, unfitted them frequently for properly discharging the duties they had to perform, and seemed to conduce to the shortening of their lives ; but matters were afterwards brought to a crisis when it became certain that two of the Brethren at Windesheim had become so weak in their intellect through the rigour of their abstinence, and the secret abstraction of the food necessary for their support, whilst actively engaged in duties, that the brain and natural operations of the body were disturbed thereby.

The first of these was Brother Berthold, one of the founders or first six Brethren of Windesheim who commenced the monastery, and who had been promoted to the Order of Subdeacon. He had a wonderful capacity for meditating on divine things, and was able to dispute most keenly. Yet he afterwards became imbecile, as the historian intimates, so that the Brethren could scarcely understand any of his words, for he went mumbling on, and would shut himself up in his own cell, and rarely came forth except when the Brethren frequented the common table.

The other was Brother Nicholas, formerly a reader in the Cathedral of Paris, and adorned with the best disposition of soul. Being made a priest he also celebrated the divine mysteries most devoutly. His love of abstinence was so great that, when sitting at table in the refectory, he would eat very little of the portion given to him, and lest it should be noticed he openly occupied his hands with his bread or other food ; so that not much attention being given to him by the Subprior, Arnold Kalker, and the other senior Brethren, his omitting to eat his food was not easily discovered until he was seized with an irrecoverable debility, so that his mind wandered, and at last he lost his reason. And for very many years he remained in this state of imbecility until his death, being burdensome to none, thankful to all ; but sleeping in his own cell, he rested himself as a turtle dove day and night, and from

henceforth never seemed to pray or read, but, after listening to the reader at dinner time, would betake himself to his cell again.

Thereupon our Fathers and the older Brethren, continues the Chronicler of Windesheim, weighing the matter well over, came to the conclusion that such rigid abstinence was neither good for the health of the soul nor for the welfare of the body, but that it tended to the perpetual destruction of persons, and of their Order; and, willing to find out some opportune remedy for so great a danger, they gave full license to all the Brethren and to the Associates, that they should eat as much as they could of the food given to them at the common table without scruple, and take it freely with a good conscience. Indeed they were not willing that Nature should be deprived of that which was needful for her support; and they at once made this proposition, that the Brethren should be made to eat according to that rule (as the needs of Nature required), however unwilling, because it was necessary for their health.

Whence it afterwards grew up to be a custom, that when any cleric wished to come among them, *three things* were demanded of him: whether he could eat well, sleep well, and whether he would yield a willing obedience, since on these three points consisted the security of their perseverance in the monastic life; and when anyone was found deficient in any one of these points he was not considered suited and fitted for the life of a 'Religious.'<sup>1</sup>

Ullmann, taking this fact by itself, and not considering its bearing upon what had happened, or the period when such a regulation was made in the society, regards the adoption of these requirements as a sign, that by degrees their zeal had cooled with their growing wealth, and that they had at length sunk back into the usual style of monastic life, too common at that time.<sup>2</sup> But this is evidently not the case, and the inference drawn from these

<sup>1</sup> Joan. Buschius, *Chron. Windes.*, lib. ii. ch. v. pp. 272-277.

<sup>2</sup> Ullmann, *Reformers before the Reformation*, vol. ii. p. 87.

qualifications is accordingly unjust. These salutary regulations were instituted in the earlier period of the existence of this reformed monastic life, which was adopted by some of the Brothers of Common Life ; and there is a proof, as will be seen in the particulars given by Thomas à Kempis himself in the *Chronicles of Mount St. Agnes*, that for a long time afterwards the Brethren were remarkable for their zeal in devotion, their love for souls, their subjugation of the flesh, and their renunciation of the world. The introduction of this new rule, relative to eating and sleeping, was evidently a wise and prudent one, as every thoughtful man must see ; and it is probably owing to the observance of it that Thomas à Kempis lived to a good old age, and was not sent to an early grave ; since his own enthusiastic spirit would have led him, in his self-subjugation, to go beyond what was proper for the retention of himself in good health. We may, therefore, deem the resolution to which the early Fathers and Brothers of the Order came, as essentially necessary and right. Nor did it lead, as it is imagined, to a relaxation in their religious ardour ; the necessity for this safeguard did not open a door—at least so long as Thomas lived and for some time afterwards—to the other extremes of indolence and indulgence, for they still preserved their simple, self-denying manner of life, and their renewed fervour in religious exercises, though it was now ever tempered with needful discretion, the which would enable them the better to fulfil their duties, and to labour the more zealously in God's service.

There are a few other particulars related respecting the Monastery of Windesheim that it will be desirable to notice, as they bear upon the life of Thomas à Kempis, in showing the habits and mode of life adopted in these Reformed Monasteries, one of which he entered ; and a few passages will be quoted to show their character and usefulness, and the esteem in which they were held.

The dress of our Brethren in Windesheim, says Buschius, was always simple and plain ; neither was it in any point different or dissimilar to the habit of the Congregation of

the Devout Clerics. For all the Brethren, the Priests, as well as the Clerics and Laics, laid aside such garments as they had been accustomed to wear before they entered the religious life, and were careful to use such as had been worn by Gerard the Great, and Father Florentius, and all the Brethren of the Congregation of 'Modern Devotion' from the beginning; for all our Brethren for many years persisted in keeping the counsels and traditional customs of the said Fathers. They had already learnt by the lively example of these Fathers the contempt of the world, the renunciation of their own will, and the mortification of the flesh; they had already conceived a fervid affection for holy simplicity, humility, devotion, and charity, in every action, in their very manners, garments, and gestures. For though those living in the monastery had adopted the habit usual to the Order of Canons Regular, yet did they not retain any curious folds or plaits, 'capparum, tunicarum, subtilium, vel super pelliciorum,' but all their garments were ordered to be made, not with fine and costly cloth, but with that which was ordinary and coarse, that by their very appearance they might be an example to others in humility, simplicity, and their contempt of the world; since they left this very example to us their descendants in writing. And so it was, the chronicler adds, that both the older and younger Brethren might frequently be seen with their various garments as named above, torn or repaired, long used, old, and much worn; for rarely had they apparel of much note except such as they wore when engaged in the service of God.

Their garments, as worn from the foundation of the monastery, and still continued, were of a dark-grey colour, the cloth being sown together in four parts. In the Priests and Clerics the tunic, or close-fitting garment, extended to the ankle; and in the Laics and 'Donati' to the middle of the legs; and they had a black leather girdle which they girt around their waists. They had also a black hood with a small crown falling down over the neck, which could easily be drawn overhead. The 'toga,' or cloak, was



likewise of a dark-grey colour, but opened half-way round to the right hand, and was of the same length as the tunic worn by the Father and Clerics of the Devout Congregation.

The chronicler here also intimates that whensoever any of the Clerics or Laity were tempted to abandon this simple form of clothing, and gradually resorted to worldly garments, it was generally regarded as a sign of a decline in grace, and a desire to follow worldly ways. And thus departing step by step from God, they succumbed to the Devil, and became members of his kingdom.

It must here, however, be observed, that the Canons Regular wore also a white linen cape, or rochet, over their other garments, which was their ordinary dress in public. They were taught, moreover, to regard their dress as a symbol of their holy profession; the white vestments were to remind them of the inward purity they should preserve, and the black hood, that they were dead to the world, and should despise it, and the things that were in the world, as is evident from the following quotation:—

*Habitus enim sanctæ religionis quem per Dei gratiam in brevi assumetis, sanctam vestram futuram vobis ostendit conversationem; in vestibus albis, internam mentis vestrae puritatem; in cappa nigra, mundi et omnium quae in mundo sunt mortem et contemptum vobis demonstrans. Hujusmodi autem documentis sanctis, fratres nostri primitivi, ad sancti habitus susceptionem, et mentium suarum mutationem se quotidie praeparabant quem ad modum pater ille venerabilis Arnoldus Huls, prope Northorn, pro aliorum reformatione monasteriorum primum emissus, hæc et his similia a devoto patre nostro Gerlaeco Petri se audisse in Windessem frequenter enarravit. Habitus etiam sanctae religionis devota susceptio, cum firmo preposito in ipsa religione et observantia regulari perpetuo perseverandi; omnem tollit peccatorum rubiginem, sicut in nuper baptizatis, juxta Patrum Orthodoxorum traditionem et sententiam.*<sup>1</sup>

There was necessarily, as must be noticed, some difference in the dresses of those connected with the monasteries, so that their position could easily be recognised thereby.

<sup>1</sup> *Chron. Windes.*, J. Buschius, lib. i. chap. xii. pp. 55, 56.

But those who wore what might be esteemed the more sacred kind of vestment, were not to think more highly of themselves on this account, or to imagine that their other Brethren not dressed so well as themselves were beneath them. For as the writer to whom we are indebted for these particulars observes: 'Though a distinction between the habits of the Brethren—the Canons, Conversi, and Lay-members—is allowed in this present life, yet in heaven none of these habits prevail, but only the excellency of their merits; for many of our Lay-brethren and "*fratres conversi*," obtaining the great reward of virtue and the fervour of charity, will take the precedence of many negligent Presbyters.' Thus they endeavoured to keep down all spiritual pride, which is so apt to beset the religious, to be humble-minded, and to esteem others better than themselves, as the Apostle Paul enjoins. There were some indeed that did not attain to this high standard of Christian humility, and others that declined from it, but we shall see, from the accounts given us by Thomas à Kempis, that it was in a remarkable degree the character of those who were joined with him in the sacred Brotherhood to which he belonged. He has given us the portraits of several whom he knew before he went to Mount St. Agnes, and he also gives us many slight sketches of those with whom he afterwards became intimately acquainted, whereby we may learn how not a few were largely endowed with moral beauty, and especially with the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which in the sight of God is, as the Apostle says, of great price.

The Chronicler of Windesheim tells us, that whenever they diligently engaged in external labours they industriously occupied their minds also with internal things, and in manual operations among their fellow-men they still had their souls fixed on God. Before they began their labours they armed themselves with good resolutions and with prayer against the temptations of the Devil; and after their labours they were none the less wont to ask forgiveness for any fault they had committed, as well as to

render thanks for the good they had received, attributing all the blessings they enjoyed in the monastery to God. And when a number of them were deputed to some external work less burdensome, and also in like manner free from distraction, so that they could occupy their minds with other things whilst they worked, then they collectively chanted the Canticles of David together, sometimes the seven penitential Psalms, or those for the vigils, or the fifteen *gradual* Psalms, and the like, were sung in the midst of their labours. And the sweet sound of their voices borne upon the air was carried to other ears, and raised up in the hearts of those who heard them a fresh glow of devotion, kindled by the praises of God to which they had listened, and which they knew came from true and earnest souls. And when they ceased from the sacred exercises of this kind, they would of their own free will preserve a strict silence for a time; and this they did in other arduous labours also, that they might sweetly meditate upon the sacred truths of the Holy Scriptures, or breathe forth their souls in devout exercises, and thus secure ample time for proper devotion.

The Brethren maintained a friendly relation with the better and stricter Monastic Orders, the Carthusians, the Cistercians, and certain of the Benedictines; for they mutually incited one another to the maintenance of godly discipline. And sometimes for the sake of recreation, mutual edification, and fraternal delectation, the Brethren among themselves would unite together in reading the Divine Word, which was to them a refectory, or they would study it by themselves alone. Thus both outwardly and inwardly, in the choir and in the house, whilst in their cells or amid their labours together, the Brethren were wont individually to act with an eye to their spiritual advancement, and the salvation of their souls. Moreover, the 'fratres novitii' and those of the lower Order, were permitted to join the older Brethren in their common labours, and when they assembled for recreation in the orchard during leisure moments. And this they were permitted

to do for greater illumination, so that by joining with their elder Brethren in rendering thanks, and sharing with them in their private religious exercises, they might be the more withdrawn from temptations peculiar to them, and, finding herein a safeguard, might be led also to the exercise of their virtues. Thus, it often happened, says Buschius, that they profited more in their interior exercises, and in their attaining to the knowledge and love of God, in one day of such recreation, than on the other eight days by listening to the usual readings in the choir and in the refectory.

The Brethren also studiously avoided inquiring into, searching after, and narrating worldly matters; such as the deeds of petty chieftains, the changes expected in the country, the quality of persons, rumours about secular affairs, the tidings of tumults and wars that in one part or another, were continually taking place, lest their attention should be turned away from the welfare of their souls, and from waiting upon God. But they learnt in this school of Christ the fulfilment of true obedience, singular patience, and attention to humble labour. And this they did by offering their hearts in true devotion to God and not to the world, and by frequently listening to the words of the Divine Scriptures, but not so much by committing them to memory, as by turning them into works.<sup>1</sup>

The leading Brothers had, moreover, for many years, at the first, a great and important work in hand, which had been pointed out to them and set on foot by their founder Gerard Groote. 'Many years,' says the Chronicler of Windesheim, 'did these holy Fathers labour to obtain as correct an edition of the whole Bible as they possibly could.' They collected ancient manuscripts from various dioceses and monasteries, diligently examined and collated them; they found out the notable changes of the sense and meaning of numberless words and passages in the Bible; they corrected discrepancies in many places. A copy of the Latin Vulgate made by St. Jerome had been procured

<sup>1</sup> Buschius, *Chron. Windes.*, lib. ii. cap. viii. pp. 286-9.



at a great price,<sup>1</sup> and they carefully compared it with the other manuscripts, and, amending their own copy by it, they obtained such an one as they considered to be authentic; they then proceeded to procure a license for the use of it, and made it the chief and acknowledged transcript of the Bible which was to serve as the authorised edition, to be followed by the copyists in writing out other copies.

It is probable that the Bible written by Thomas à Kempis for the use of the Monastery of Mount St. Agnes was copied from this corrected and approved edition, and that this necessitated his frequently visiting the mother-monastery at Windesheim for consecutive portions of it, as he required them; for the Canons were very willing to lend their manuscripts to those whom they could trust, and who would bring them back in good condition. And from the Bible written out in the large, legible hand which à Kempis here adopted—much larger than that in which he wrote the ‘*De Imitatione Christi*,’ in 1441, but similar to that in which he wrote his Missal in 1417—others would not only read for many generations, but copy various portions as they needed, if not make complete copies, as Thomas had done.

Besides this, the Canons of Windesheim, including those of the associated monasteries as they arose into being, were forward in promoting the spread of the Gospel throughout the country. This work, as may be remembered, was warmly taken up by Gerard Groote; but it was carried on by the Canons not so much by what may be regarded public preaching, as Gerard at first endeavoured to do, but rather by private conferences, or collations, as they were termed, and to which allusion has been already made—when a few anxious inquirers and awakened souls, gathered together, would, after singing a hymn, have a portion of the Gospels, or some other part of Holy Scripture, read to them in the mother-tongue, and familiarly expounded, answering any questions put to them, followed by a short

<sup>1</sup> The translation of St. Jerome is invaluable as showing how the text stood in his time, and from its having been done in Palestine.

exhortation, a prayer, and more singing. Upon dispersing, the Brethren would frequently give short slips of paper to the people, containing portions of the Bible, or some of the maxims of the saints, to read in their homes, and exchange with one another. In this propagation of the Gospel among their neighbours and countrymen, they had nothing in common with the sermons of the Mendicant Monks, replete with subtle syllogisms, unintelligible Latin quotations, and legendary stories, productive of little moral influence, and which carried with them no converting power.

Though these Canons took upon themselves the vows of their Order, they neither imposed their own rule, or the taking vows, or an absolute retreat from the world upon their disciples or hearers. Their object was to stir up piety among secular men, i.e. among those following their worldly calling, so that the laity might be religious though they did not enter the convent or monastery. They spoke to them in a plain manner, but so spontaneously from the heart, that their words penetrated to their inner conscience, and they shewed to their hearers that it was possible for them to follow the example of Jesus Christ without flying from the duties of Common Life. This was the grand and fertile principle of a religious *renaissance* indicated by their founder in his writings, and was now bearing fruit in his disciples.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to this, these Canons Regular did much to further a liberal education among the people in accordance with the views and efforts of their master, of which some mention has been made; they even went beyond him, or rather more fully developed the system which he inaugurated. They not only afforded facilities of education to the labouring class, in opening and supporting schools of rudimentary instruction, but they sought to advance the cause of learning among the better class. They knew well how to unfold in a rich and corrupt age, the austere beauty of apostolic virtue; and sought how to associate these two things so often separated—the most evangelical faith with a

<sup>1</sup> See MS, at the Hague, No. 154, fol. 259, *Epist. ad Johannem Cele.*

study of the classics. Among the collection of manuscripts obtained by Gerard Groote and afterwards by the Canons, often at a great price, or in exchange for some of their own manuscripts which they had written, might be seen the works of Cicero and Seneca by the side of the Epistles of St. Paul, the lives of Plutarch by the side of the Acts of the Apostles, and the poetry of Virgil and Plautus by the side of the works of St. Augustine and St. Bernard.<sup>1</sup> And they did that which a lover of old manuscripts is often backward in doing, they lent and exchanged them very freely. Thus faith and science, divinity and learning, went hand in hand. Hence followed, as is well known, the rehabilitation of literature, or rather of pious learning, which became the glory of the Brothers of Common Life.

But the finest feature in this religious awakening of the 'New Devotion,' and that which offers the most remarkable contrast to the inanimate and formal piety of their times, was the joyous character of their religion and the fervour of their spirit. This had been strongly insisted upon by Gerard Groote, and the Canons of Windesheim and the other Brethren caught up the tones, as if they were the echoes of the Psalmist, 'O be joyful in the Lord : serve the Lord with gladness.' This feature is very visible in Groote's 'Moral Allocution.' But in no part did it appear more clearly than in his letters to his friend John Cele. Listen to these words :—'My brother and very dear friend, be joyful in the Lord, serve the Lord with joy. Rejoice yourself—I repeat again to you, rejoice yourself. Meditate without ceasing upon these words.'<sup>2</sup> This joyousness in the service of God and in the doing of His will, repeatedly crops out in the lives which are recounted of the Brothers. And amid the urgency with which Thomas à Kempis insists upon giving up the love of the world and the things of the world, and keeping ourselves in subjection to the will of God, he ever holds out the delight to be found in

<sup>1</sup> J. Buschius, *Op. Cit.* cap. ii.

<sup>2</sup> Manuscript at the Hague, No. 154. Compare six other letters to J. Cele, fols. 350, 260.

true religion. Thus to take one instance from his golden treasury of devotion, the 'De Imitatione Christi : ' speaking upon the words, 'My God and my all,' he says :—

To him who understands, this saying is enough : and to say it over and over again is delightful to him who loves.

If Thou, (O Lord,) art present all things are delightful, but if Thou art absent all things are wearisome. Thou makest the heart to be tranquil, and givest great peace and festive joy.

Thou makest us to think well of all, and to praise thee in all circumstances ; and nothing without Thee can afford any lasting pleasure ; but if anything is to be pleasant and delightful, Thy grace and Thy wisdom must impart a relish to it.

He who has a relish for Thee, will he not find sweetness in everything ? and he that has no relish for Thee, what can be sweet to him ? . . .

O Light Eternal, transcending all created lights, dart Thy bright beams from above, and penetrate the inmost recesses of my heart.

Cleanse, gladden, brighten, and enliven my spirit with all its powers, that I may cleave to Thee with ecstasies of joy.<sup>1</sup>

The 'New Devotion,' that was thus maintained and propagated by these Canons Regular, led all that wisely considered it to see that there was in true religion a reality and deep source of joy. Its aspect and its message seemed to say, Though it may appear hard at the first to the carnal man to subdue and keep in subjection his evil appetites, to give up the love of the world, and to bring himself into a strict conformity to the will of God, still, if he heartily embraces Christianity, makes an earnest struggle to obey the precepts of the Gospel, and to live as a true follower of the blessed Jesus, he will afterwards find more real and enduring happiness than he would in the possession of this world's goods, or in a constant round of gaiety. And what was this but a living proof of what the Psalmist himself had seen when he exclaimed, 'Great peace have they who love thy law ; and they are not offended at it ;' and a corroboration of what a greater than the Psalmist said,

<sup>1</sup> Lib. iii. cap. xxxiv. 1, 3.



when he cried, 'Blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it.'

No wonder that 'the fame of the holy conversation of these primitive Fathers at Windesheim was noised abroad throughout our whole land,' as the Chronicler of Windesheim has it, 'and was everywhere fruitfully passed on from mouth to mouth, so that the mention of their regular observances, and of their efforts after a most excellent reformation became celebrated, and came to the knowledge of very many. The Lord disposed the hearts of our Fathers at Windesheim to recall many living in the world from the error of their ways, to true repentance and the acknowledgment of their offences. Many of both sexes were vehemently drawn by the fragrance of the virtues of this monastery in the time of Father Huesden the Prior; so that they flocked thither in great numbers for the salvation of their souls, seeking counsel, and help, and encouragement, through the beholding such examples of holy life.'<sup>1</sup>

Indeed this devout Prior, continues the chronicler, from the beginning of his priorate unto the end of his life, and all the Brethren of his time, were wont to draw men, who came of their own free will; and to receive them graciously for pity's sake, to treat them kindly, and converse freely with them, according to the condition, rank, and quality of each. And while they took care daily to refresh the bodies of their guests with corporal sustenance, so did they daily entertain their souls with spiritual banquets. Charitably harbouring all and everyone that came to them, as welcome guests for God's sake, they administered most liberally of their life and necessary food, according to the ability of the monastery; they themselves in the meantime being content with very little, patiently enduring any penury, that they might provide those who visited them, for the love of God and for the salvation of their souls, with better food for awhile.

Therefore they never permitted anyone to depart from them unconsoled, and before they had first refreshed both

<sup>1</sup> J. Buschius, *Chron. Windes.* ii. cap. ix. p. 290.

his mind and body. For fearing God, and being desirous of their own selves to be serviceable to them, they joyfully received them with a glad countenance, paternal affection, and a warm grasp of the hand ; not that they were wont to refresh their visitors so much with nice preparations of delicate food, as with the loving converse of their own good pleasure. Whence it happened that many scholars, and many learned as well as unlearned men, beholding their holy life and angelic conversation, the discipline of their manners, and being edified by their loving words also, and not the less admiring their unity and concord, esteemed themselves happy if they were found worthy to be accepted, and joined to the happy companionship of their sacred college.

From that time therefore—speaking of Huesden's priorate—and henceforth, our church at Windesheim, acting under the divine influence of the Holy Spirit, being abundantly in all respects watered with the dew of heavenly grace, gathered into her bosom the elect sons of God, natives of the eternal kingdom, men especially adorned with great perfection of virtues, pillars of our Order and of the Church, of which they were soon to become immovable foundation stones. These she religiously educated in her lap and led on to perfection.

And speaking of those early days of the community at Windesheim, whilst Thomas à Kempis was still alive at Mount St. Agnes, the chronicler of the former place says, 'It was the glory of this monastery that, of the forty Brethren invested by this Prior (Huesden), twenty were canonically elected and rightly confirmed as Priors and Rectors in different monasteries of our Order.'

Of a few of these monasteries, that were the off-shoots or offspring of the mother-church at Windesheim, some allusion should here be made. The first of these was that called the Fountain of the Blessed Mary, near Arnheim, which was founded and established in 1392<sup>1</sup> by the vener-

<sup>1</sup> This was about the time when Thomas was received by Florentius at Deventer ; and the sending of some of the Brothers to the new monastery doubtless caused a vacancy the more readily for Thomas.

able Father Florentius, Master John de Gronde, Master John Brinckerinck, with the consent of the Fathers and Brethren at Windesheim, with John Huesden their Prior. Two gentlemen of that country, however, may be regarded as the real founders, for they provided funds, and applied to the aforesaid Fathers, who at their request undertook the charge of it, having gained the consent of the Lord of the land, and the approbation of the Bishop of the diocese (Utrecht). For the maintenance of the Brothers, however, it appears that a large sum of money was settled upon the monastery, soon after its foundation. This came through Father Florentius, but was really given by John Kettel, the cook of the Brothers at Deventer, whom it will be remembered came into possession of his paternal property about this time. The sum is said to have been 300,000 florins. And so large a gift was made, because, to use the words of the chronicle, at that time there was so much love among them, that the spiritual and temporal goods of the Congregation at Deventer were held as almost common, to those in the monasteries at Windesheim and the Fount of the Blessed Mary. John Brinckerinck sent ten florins, and procured many gifts for them. He also undertook much trouble in the establishment of the monastery, receiving any of the Brethren that came to Deventer as guests in his house so long as he lived. Florentius, who already had given nearly all he possessed, sent them twenty florins and two crowns of Francis. The Prior of Windesheim always aided them by his counsel and help, often despatching thither one or other of the Brethren for their better edification. John à Kempis, the brother of Thomas, was the first Prior. And after him 'our Brother Arnold de Kalker, a great man in Christ, and the especial glory of our monastery at Windesheim.'

The next monastery established was that called 'Novæ Lucis' near Hoern, the founders of which were Gerard de Hoern and Paul de Medenblic, two devout Priests and disciples of Gerard the Great.

Then follows in the chronicle an account of the death

of Florentius, Bishop of Utrecht in 1394, and the election in his place of Frederick de Blankenheim. He is here deservedly mentioned by them because he took the Order of Canons Regular of Windesheim under his protection ; and the number of devout Priests, Clerics, and Sisters greatly increased on every side under his rule. The general Chapter of the Order was also begun at Windesheim under him, and existed by his favour, till the monasteries increased to eighty in number, and to which more than a thousand persons were attached.

With one only of these monasteries, however, which is next mentioned, are we now more particularly concerned, and that is Mount St. Agnes, the third offspring of the mother-monastery of Windesheim. This monastery was founded in the year 1398, when the first four Brothers of the Monastery of Mount St. Agnes were instituted by John Wael, Prior of the Canons Regular in the town of Zwolle, on the day of the Annunciation. After Easter they were incorporated into the General Chapter of Windesheim. But their investment and profession was made sometime later on in the Chapel of the Blessed Virgin Mary, after mass by and before Hubert, Suffragan Bishop of Utrecht.

Many more interesting particulars are given respecting the origin of this monastery by Thomas à Kempis, especially relative to the difficulties they had to contend with, and the various changes that took place, which I purpose to give shortly : I would, however, here add one or two particulars given by Buschius respecting it. He says :—

The first Prior of this monastery was our Brother John Hamer de Kempis, he having been professed in Windesheim, who religiously and praiseworthily governed the same monastery with many poor Associates nine years, and greatly benefited it in buildings, in books, and in temporal goods.<sup>1</sup>

Buschius also gives us a letter from Father Florentius, Rector of the Congregation of Clerics at Deventer, to John Huesden, Prior in Windesheim, from which it would appear

<sup>1</sup> *Chron. Windes.*, lib. i. cap. xxxix. p. 166.



that the kind physician, Everard of Almelo, who was converted by Gerard the Great, who became the curé of the place where he had lived, and so successfully attended Thomas à Kempis in his sickness, was the first to suggest the founding of the Monastery of Mount St. Agnes, which was to be so long the future home of Thomas, and both assisted and gained the help and co-operation of others in the work.

I shall now conclude this chapter with an epilogue from Buschius concerning these monasteries and Congregations of the Devotees which were founded or reformed in his time, shewing, as he says, the amount of good done by them in the earth, and the operation of grace manifested through them by God. ‘Great and wonderful works of Divine grace do we acknowledge to have been done in our days, and in those a little time before us, which being set before our eyes in all the region round about we have beheld greatly multiplied and diffused, and have so continued to this very day. For a long time there was no place in our land to fly unto but what was barren, dry, and unfruitful, where men could seek salvation and labour for the individual welfare of the soul. For not only in the world but in the profession of religion there was a wide and open road leading to perdition, in which men and women, young and old, were inclined to walk. There were at that time few of the Orders, except the Carthusians and certain Cistercians, who observed their rules and constitutions; for the greater part of them, and three substantially of them, were open transgressors. For the account of the reformation of monasteries and individuals, which was in fact very rarely mentioned before our times, is now in the mouth of all spiritual and secular men and women as honey, and their deeds spread over the whole country. For scarcely is there a town or city to be found in the whole nation but where in the neighbourhood monasteries—either of the new foundation or reformed from old ones—and Congregations, besides very many smaller habitations of the Devotees, are to be met with. And since we must

often speak of them, we have now more than eighty well-reformed monasteries of our Order united and incorporated with the General Chapter of Windesheim : settled in seventeen dioceses, regulated by a good and holy rule ; by observing which very many secular and spiritual monks and Sisters are edified and led to do the like ; altogether avoiding crime and sin, solicitously observing the Divine precepts, and by so much the more readily do they attain to the sanctified course of a holy life, since they are not a little incited thereto by the words and examples which they behold. Moreover, through the whole of our country, the inhabitants thereof are inwardly illuminated with the light of Divine grace by the conversation of their new life.

For day and night in the choir and in the monastery they never suffer the Divine praises or their holy labours to cease ; no time is permitted to be uselessly spent without engaging in some special internal or external work, some mental or manual labour ; they daily mortify their own will, they stoutly resist the temptations of the enemy, they faithfully serve God, and after this manner assailing the kingdom of heaven with violence, they in deed and in truth attain to it.

The Brethren are never unemployed ; but as bees they are continually making increase, for they cease not to labour assiduously for their own salvation, and to gain the souls of others, and thus they gather much fruit that will endure to eternal life. Certain of the aforesaid monasteries have very many persons in them ; others have fewer according to the necessities of the place and the means of subsistence : some have twenty Brethren, others have thirty or forty ; others again have seventy or eighty, a few about a hundred, and a hundred and twenty, and some even three and four hundred, more or less. Of these eighty monasteries, and one hundred and fifty Congregations, who will speak lightly ! For all these by the grace of God, and in the hope of eternal life, have persevered unto this day of their own will in a holy calling. Let us, moreover, pass on to other persons, and let us see how many of both

sexes there are, who united to the Brethren in friendship, are drawn from the vanities of the world by their conversation, to the attainment of better things. Who can tell how many there are who are now willingly serving God of their own free will, being induced and incited thereto by their example, who although they have not as yet given themselves up entirely to acquiring all the evangelical precepts on account of many hindrances, yet study through their instructions to observe a holy life, free from sin !

For which of those who at the first began 'the Common Life' could ever believe that it would thus succeed ; who could estimate that such a multitude of saints would arise throughout the whole of Germany from so humble a source and from those few Fathers ? Who cannot but repeat, what the Lord in Isaiah tells His once desolate Church, she will yet be able to say in her heart, 'Who hath begotten me these ?' and again, 'Who hath brought up these ? Behold I was left alone ; these, where had they been (xlix. 21) ? And, lastly, they can very properly add the words which follow, 'The place of my habitation is enlarged' (Isai. liv. 2).<sup>1</sup> The allusion to these two passages in Isaiah shews that the devout men who thus faithfully served God, and laboured for the salvation of souls, were cheered in their work by beholding how wonderfully in their case God had fulfilled His promises of old. The beautiful and gracious words of the promises in both instances they felt to be applicable to their own institutions which had so rapidly increased and spread out on all sides. The words following also seemed to come again to them in all their first freshness, 'Lift up thine eyes round about and behold : all these gather themselves together, and come unto thee. As I live, saith the Lord, thou shalt surely clothe thee with them all, as with an ornament, and bind them on thee, as a bride doeth' (xlix. 18).

The Order of Canons Regular which Thomas à Kempis was about to join was not, as we have seen, and as it has been represented, another society, but—and it is important

<sup>1</sup> *Chron. de Windes.*, chap. xlvii. pp. 211-216.

to draw attention to this point again for a reason assigned below—an integral part, though a higher grade, of ‘the Brothers of Common Life;’ since the Canons Regular still continued Brothers of Common Life, while watching over, and caring more particularly for, the spiritual welfare of the great body of the brotherhood. And, on the other hand, the Congregations or Houses of the Brothers, where vows were not taken and which formed the main body of the society, were as feeders, and supplied suitable men, to the higher grade—many of the Brethren, as we have seen, leaving their several Houses to take upon themselves the habit and become Canons, while some took Priest’s orders and entered upon a wider sphere of spiritual labour.

Thus Gerard’s institution grew up, as it has been fitly described, ‘with a double stem.’ The larger portion of the society, being usually called ‘Brothers of Common Life,’ had greater freedom of action, and penetrated more deeply into the life of the people, and were partly priests and partly laymen, and either dwelt together in confraternities and sisterhoods without taking any vows, or were severally dispersed to occupy themselves in religious works, or the education of the young, whilst still keeping up a constant connection with the parent society. The Canons Regular, who were united in the monasteries according to the stricter forms of conventual life, constituted centres for the Brotherhood to which they might look up, and resort to for counsel, encouragement, and support. These Canons, taking upon themselves the vows of perpetual poverty, obedience, and chastity, were consequently in some measure more secluded from the world. This review of the two branches of the Brothers of Common Life has been in some degree needed, because their intimate union, and their development from one original stock under the directions of Gerard, have been somewhat overlooked by Dr. Neale in his ‘History of the Jansenist Church of Holland;’ for viewing them as independent bodies in their early existence, and unconnected with each other, he appears to have been led to a wrong deduction respecting them; for he says:



'In the middle of the fifteenth century a union took place between the two, and thenceforth the earlier appellation of "Brothers of Common Life" was generally lost in that of the Canons Regular of Windesheim.'<sup>1</sup> Now we learn from authentic records, written by early members of the body, that they were always united, the one springing out of the other, and the Canons forming a leading company of the whole confraternity.

The Canons Regular of Windesheim formed a part of the Brotherhood from the beginning of their existence, and the date of their union with it was therefore before the close of the fourteenth century. It may have been that the above-named writer in his varied and extensive reading had not perused the records of the society themselves, but taken the account from other historians; and we know how points of history get misrepresented when the description does not come from original sources; it was this doubtless that led the same writer to observe, that 'the wisdom of Geert Groot (Gerard the Great) in avoiding any close assimilation to, or amalgamation with, the Canons Regular will, perhaps, be acknowledged.'<sup>2</sup> This must be wrong, since it was the wisdom of Gerard that devised the institution of Canons Regular, and that they should be closely allied to and continue amalgamated with the Brothers; for it will be remembered how he spake, and what directions he gave concerning it, to his followers on his dying bed, and how they were faithfully carried out shortly after his death by Florentius and a few devout and holy men along with him, who anxiously laboured to bring the design into existence in all its fulness and efficiency; inviting and inducing earnest-minded men to join these monasteries of Canons Regular. Thomas à Kempis, to whose proceedings we must now turn, was one of these, and the Monastery of Mount St. Agnes, where he was about to take up his abode, is the one to which we must chiefly confine our attention.

<sup>1</sup> Chap. ii. p. 102.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

CHAPTER XV. *Windesheim*

À Kempis leaves Deventer—Calls at Windesheim—Attends an Indulgence at Zwolle—Proceeds to the Monastery at Mount St. Agnes—An account of the locality as it now is—À Kempis received by his brother John, the first Prior—Enters upon a Novitiate of some years—The Prescripts of Gerard which he observes—His eager aspirations after holiness of life—His soliloquy upon retiring from the world—The rule of Augustine as observed by the Canons at Mount St. Agnes—What monasteries should be according to à Kempis.

VERY touching must have been the parting farewell, when Thomas à Kempis came to wish 'good-bye' to the Brothers at Deventer, and his dear spiritual friend and director Florentius. The latter was now in a very feeble state of health, and there seemed little chance of his life being prolonged many days, so that the separation would be regarded by both as final, with respect to ever seeing each other again in this world. And though we have no tidings or allusion to their last interview, yet one may well imagine how the sadness of the tender leave-taking was lighted up with the glow of spiritual hope, that the parting would be but for a time, and that they would hereafter meet again in the presence of their loving and all-glorious Redeemer.

Bearing away with him the blessing and recommendations of Florentius, Thomas started on his journey.

On his way to his future home à Kempis must needs pass not far from Windesheim. The monastery, which had now been fourteen years in existence, had considerably increased in size, and in the number of its inmates; and having completed their external works, the Canons and other Brothers could now give themselves more entirely to their spiritual labours and efforts to build up the faithful,

and extend the work of reformation in religion. The place was not unknown to Thomas. He had been there before ; seven years previous to this time he had come hither to seek his brother John, and take counsel with him about the future ; and now, as he was passing by the spot to join this brother in another place, and as there were probably several of the Brothers here that he knew, it is only natural to suppose that he called, and tarried awhile with them to know how they fared, and to bring them news of Florentius, whom all the community revered and looked up to as a father. And it is the more likely that Thomas did call here, because the Superior of the Order which he was about to join, was the Prior of this monastery, and it was at least becoming, if not necessary, that he should present himself before him, and gain his approval for the step he was taking. How far this was the case we know not ; there is little doubt but that he regarded the place with peculiar affection as the habitation of many pious men, with whom he was to be linked in the bonds of a spiritual brotherhood.

We have certain information, however, that on his way to Mount St. Agnes he stayed at Zwolle, a town not far distant, through which he had to pass. And here he tarried awhile, though the place of his destination was only a good hour's walk beyond. The object of his stay at Zwolle was that he might participate in the Indulgence granted by Pope Boniface IX., which was at that time bestowed on all those who piously visited the Church of St. Michael in that town,<sup>1</sup> which was then in the course of being restored, and who contributed something towards its reparation and adornment. Such ordinances have indeed led to much evil, and have accordingly been rejected by the Church of England. Not only did it imply a relaxation of Church laws, and the favour of heaven to the faithful penitent, but men were led to feel that they could commit sin with greater impunity when they were assured that they could gain remission of the punishment of sins,

<sup>1</sup> Thom. à Kemp., *Chronicles of Mount St. Agnes*, ch. viii. p. 29.

by the payment of a certain sum,<sup>1</sup> or by the going on some pilgrimage ; or, that by doing some penance they could rescue their souls from torment. Without considering for one moment that à Kempis looked with any favour upon such abuses of the ordinance, for it is well known that he was opposed to many of the crying evils that abounded in the Church, yet as a true son of the Church he would doubtless regard the occasion of the Indulgence in a spiritual light, and look upon it as an opportunity when God was more ready to be gracious, and to grant the petitions of those who sought His favour with greater fervency. Not that God is not ready at all times to hear the prayers of His people, and grant forgiveness to all true penitent believers ; but that, according to that intimation of our Saviour, ‘when two of you shall agree on earth touching anything that they shall ask,’ He is the more inclined to listen to us ; and, as this passage follows upon the censure of one who neglects to hear the Church, it seems to imply that the authority in the Church should be obeyed when consonant with God’s holy laws. It was probably in this light that Thomas regarded the observance of this Indulgence.

It was the Feast of the Recovery of the Holy Cross (May 3). Thomas was just making another great change in his life, and knew not how it would fare with him : he was of that temperament to be duly affected by any special services at such a time, and would doubtless seize upon the period of the Indulgence as a special opportunity for cleansing and sanctifying his soul anew, and dedicating himself afresh to God and seeking His blessing upon the

<sup>1</sup> See ‘the Tax of the Sacred Roman Chancery,’ in which are contained the exact sums to be levied for the pardon of each particular sin. (Buck. *Theological Dict.* p. 456.) Luther in his 27th thesis says : ‘They preach a mockery who pretend, that as soon as the penny clinks into the box, the soul escapes from Purgatory.’ And before Luther’s time, a friend of à Kempis, Wessel, says : ‘The people think one thing of Indulgences, and the Pope another. The Pope gives plenary remission from a penance he has imposed. The people understand by it, an unobstructed transition to blessedness.’ *Sacram. Pœnit.* p. 806.



step he was taking, ere he sought admission to the small monastery of his choice.

His brother John had only the year before been made Prior of Mount St. Agnes; and it might be thought that he needed no letters of introduction to him from Florentius, the more especially when this brother had at first brought Thomas under the kind consideration of Florentius. But these letters are to be regarded as letters of commendation which were required from the superior of the House where he had lived to another for the due reception of a Brother, and was customary when any change of the kind was made.

The road to Mount St. Agnes is level, as is the country around; and it is only as you approach the site of the monastery that you gain any elevation. The place would hardly in the estimation of a stranger be regarded as a mount or hill; though in this country, which in some places is very flat, even a slight elevation is regarded as such. From the account which Thomas gives of the place the mount was somewhat higher than it is now; and the new monastery had been recently erected not far from the side of the river Vecht, which then abounded with fish.

The place is now called Agnietenberg. It was a delightful day when I visited it in the autumn of the year 1875. The situation is pleasant and healthy. A fine, genial, bracing air wafted softly across these downs, which was very refreshing, and helped to bring my mind in tune for spending a few leisure moments and lingering meditatively about the spots where the saintly Thomas had lived so long, and pondering upon the earnest piety once exhibited in this place. I had left Zwolle by the 'Dieserstraat,' and taken the road which in all likelihood Thomas had taken centuries before, and in a short time arrived at the spot. There are now but a few isolated dwellings in the immediate neighbourhood. A farm-house or two, the auberge, and the school with a school-house; for not far distant other houses are to be found. This school was at the end of a large open burial-ground, which was in all probability the site of the

ancient church or chapel of the monastery ; for though few traces of it are to be found, and little information to be gleaned from the inhabitants of what formerly existed in the place, I observed that several of the grave-stones or posts, which had numbers on them to indicate the spot where the remains of loved relatives were buried, had evidently at one time been window-mullions or door-sills, and had been taken from some superior building and utilised for the necessities of the place. While walking about the cemetery four men came, and, going to a building near, brought out spades, and began to dig a grave for some one whom they were about to inter ; and, from what I could gather, I learned that this spot was a favourite burial-place for the people of Zwolle.

At the lower end of the grave-yard, in the small field adjoining and lying towards Zwolle, I could trace the foundations of some building that evidently dated far back, for three sides of a square were clearly marked by the mounds which were visible. I entered the school, and found the children very busy at work, very orderly, and apparently well-taught ; and most pleasing was it to know that here, in the locality where Thomas à Kempis had himself taught others the knowledge of the spiritual life, there was to be found an excellent mixed school, where the children of the surrounding neighbourhood might receive a good education. The site of the monastery itself was in all probability on another elevation—in all likelihood on the place where the auberge now stands ;—such is the belief. Here I got some refreshment of bread and milk ; and in the room where I sat I saw an old coloured drawing of Thomas à Kempis sitting in the neighbourhood of Mount St. Agnes, with a book in his hand, and two or three other books around him, with an ink-horn, having a receptacle for pens, resting on them. He appears advanced in years, with a large and thoughtful face somewhat elongated by age ; a calm serenity is seen in his expression which seems to speak of a soul at peace with God. On his head he wears a cap, something like a ‘ biretta,’ but different from that worn by the Roman Catholic priests at the present

time ; he is dressed in the white habit of his Order, and over his shoulders there is a cape or rug, with a fringe.

The drawing is taken from an old copy, and the features are very similar to the authentic portrait of him to be seen in Zwolle, which is in a very decayed state. There is to be seen also in the picture a representation of the place as it was in Thomas à Kempis's time. On the higher elevation we have the monastery and its outer buildings ; lower down among the trees is the church, and on another side we have the wind-mill for grinding the corn. In the distance we have a view of Zwolle and of the surrounding country ; for from another of the elevations, covered with a plantation of low oak-trees, with numerous pleasant walks, having a summer-house in the centre and at the highest point, the tops of the houses, and the tower of St. Michael's Church with its spire, and the turrets of the Sassenpoort-gate can be easily distinguished. I tried to procure this drawing on the wall of the auberge, but in vain. It belonged to the place and was needful for the maintenance of its celebrity. In vain also I tried to procure a copy of it in Zwolle ; but my kind friend Mr. Th. van Riemsdijk afterwards, on my return home, obtained one for me from a Mr. van Doorminck, the Archivist of the province of Overijssel, who was much interested in all things concerning Thomas à Kempis, and kindly forwarded it to me. It is this which has been reproduced as the frontispiece to the second volume.

The House at Mount St. Agnes was, at the time Thomas went thither, very poor and little known or resorted to ;<sup>1</sup> it was therefore the more agreeable to him, since he could here best lie hid, and remain undistracted by the changes and turmoil of a busy world, and at the same time enjoy the friendship of a few earnest-minded men, with whom he could freely converse on the things of God. The Brother-house at Deventer was in the town ; this was in the country, where there were but few habitations. It was in the spring of 1399, when nearly twenty years old, that

<sup>1</sup> F. Tolensis, *Vita Thom. à Kemp.* p. 2.

à Kempis went to the Monastery of Mount St. Agnes, and, making a most urgent request for a place, was received by his only brother John with tender affection and much joy.<sup>1</sup> One great desire of their lives had been accomplished, that they might be brought together and be united in the service of God ; and it is said of them that they were both so sensible of the blessing that, when reflecting and talking over this gracious providence of God, they cried out together in those joyful words of the Psalmist, ‘ O how good and joyful ‘a thing it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!’ And many were the sweet and sacred discourses that these two brothers-german had together, mutually inciting and edifying one another to the increase of each other in grace, and in the knowledge and love of our Saviour Jesus Christ. It was another great advantage to promoting the perfection of Thomas’s saintly character that he should have such a brother nigh at hand, whom he might look up to, and at all times consult about the welfare of his own soul, and how he might best serve God and glorify His holy name. It is thought that by his advice, and probably under his direction at first, Thomas was induced to write some short devotional works, which were primarily spread abroad without his name, for the instruction and guidance of devout souls. This, however, came later on, when he had been there some little time, though probably one or two were begun with scattered pieces, which formed part of another work, before his novitiate came to a close.

The requirements and examination of the novice upon his entering the Order might not at first have taken the regular form which it afterwards did, and in the case of Thomas might not be so strictly exacted of him. And yet some form of reception would take place, for the Brothers would not be disposed to receive him without due solemnity. We learn from the Statutes of Windesheim, which were framed some time after this—and something approaching to what is here said might have taken place

<sup>1</sup> Thom. à Kemp., *Chron. Mt. St. Agnes*, chap. viii. p. 29.



when Thomas was received—that great care was to be taken in receiving novices ; that they should not be ignorant, or inclined to vice or idleness ; and not only pre-disposed but solicitous to enter the religious life. Inquiry was to be made whether they had formerly lived in good repute, whether they had been tractable and willing to be corrected, lest they should afterward bring disgrace upon the community.

In proving them it was to be noticed whether they were constant in religion and alienated from the world, not caring for dress, prompt in the exercises of labour and humiliation ; whether they voluntarily practised the mortification of the senses, were given to silence and quietness, engaged in sacred reading, were ready for vigils and abstinence, prompt in confessing sins and making known their temptations. And in these and other ways they were to be tried, whether they were truly dead to the world and self.

Young men were not to be received before they were eighteen. Neither were any of the clerical Brethren to be received from one House to another for probation or profession without leave from the General Chapter. On the day when anyone came to be incorporated, upon being introduced by one of the Brothers, he was to prostrate himself at the feet of the Prior, and entreat to be received. The Prior was then to interrogate him concerning his wish to become a member of their body, and whether he would be true to the fraternity if they should accept him. Then, standing up in the midst of the Brethren, the Prior would especially ask him these four questions : (1) Whether he already belonged to any Order ; (2) Whether he was free to choose a religious life ; (3) Whether he had made an engagement to any woman ; (4) and whether he was bound by any vow. In addition to these, the Prior was to ascertain whether he had any hidden or incurable disease, and if he were in any quarrel or debt, and whether he had made satisfaction for them, if he had any. And after the Prior was satisfied with his answers, he was to say to him,

‘The Lord give thee the abundance of His grace that thou mayest persevere unto eternal life.’ After this the candidate was to do reverence to the Sub-prior, and, joining his hands together, ask him also to receive him.

Previous to the day when the novice took his place as one of the Brethren he was admonished to make a full confession of his life to the Prior, and all being satisfactory he was to receive the Holy Sacrament before the time of his institution. An hour before mass the majority of the Brethren were to assemble in the sacristy, when his outer garments were taken off, and he was clothed in a religious habit. Then when the Prior approached the altar to minister, he was led to the steps thereof, and prostrating himself, the rest of the Brethren were all to sing the ‘Veni Creator,’ with the collects, ‘God, who knoweth the hearts,’ and ‘Give to us, O Lord.’ The Prior was then to proceed with the service, and at the close he was to come forward and welcome the novice by giving him the kiss of peace, and this in turn was to be done by each of the Brethren. Having then been inducted into the novitiate, he was to take the lowest place ; he was not yet to wear the ‘Almutia,’ but the open capouch or monk’s cowl. One of the Brethren was to be especially appointed to instruct him diligently concerning the inclination of his body, his bearing, and every gesture, even to the casting down of his eyes ; how he was to behave submissively, not to speak hastily, but to show the signs of humility in every action. He was to be taught how to offer up divine praise aright, to sing before the altar, and at all times to speak softly ; and how to conduct himself towards the Prior and the rest of the Brethren. But chiefly was he to be admonished that he should study to make advance in every good work, and to set himself in opposition to everything that was evil, even with tears, firmly repressing every vice and all carnal desires.

Thomas à Kempis was one of the earliest novices at Mount St. Agnes, and having been previously well trained under Florentius, and strongly recommended by him, he might not need the instructions usually given ; but in the

above account we learn how they were wont to receive novices when matters were more settled in the monastery, during à Kempis's time ; and as he had more to do with the training of novices afterwards than the other Brethren, it is well that the method of receiving and instructing them, as practised in their monasteries, should have thus been alluded to.

At his first entering, à Kempis had to attend to the discipline of his soul and to engage zealously in some regular employment for the sustentation of the monastery ; this was chiefly in copying manuscripts, in which, as it has been already stated, he greatly excelled. He did not, as some are accustomed to do, observes Tolensis, precipitate himself from the outset into taking upon himself the monastic vows, ignorant of what he would have to bear willingly, or unwilling to relinquish a life in the world. For it is necessary, continues the biographer, to consider exactly and to weigh a long time what is to be determined upon once for all. Five years, therefore, did Thomas pass in his novitiate as a candidate for the religious life, that he might thoroughly know his own mind and try well how such a kind of life would agree with him, 'for he foresaw,' says another writer, 'the greater danger of entering rashly into such a state without all that caution and preparation which both divine and human prudence do absolutely require.' It was likewise a custom at that time to try generally the candidates for a long period, or at least till they were thoroughly proved and tried before they were allowed to take the habit upon them. During this time he appears to have more fully considered the Prescripts of the Brotherhood as delivered by Gerard their founder, and as generally received by the Society, and resolved to fashion his own life in accordance with them. The chief of these were :

1. Diligently to read and search the Scriptures.
2. In the interpretation thereof to observe a great deference to the ancient doctors of the Church, such as St. Jerome, St. Augustine.
3. To labour earnestly in an endeavour to imitate the

life of Christ, and to live like the primitive Christians, adopting both their principles and practices.

4. Not to mind much curious learning or refined literature, but to apply themselves to what was useful, and to study most to know the will of God.

5. Freely to protest against the abuses and corruptions of both the clergy and laity as occasion should offer, and endeavour to win them to a better life.

6. Not to take any honorary degrees after their admission into the Society, or to seek after worldly distinction.

7. Not to accept any ecclesiastical benefice, or worldly gain, but to preach the Word of God freely, and exercise a great love for souls.

8. Not to study either the canon or civil law, unless for the purpose of more easily settling differences among neighbours, and for the better maintenance of concord and charity.

9. Not to take upon them the business of friends or relations but where mercy, piety, and justice required them to do so.

10 Contains some directions for the preservation of health and cautions about the use of medicines.<sup>1</sup> Besides these there were a great many other rules and maxims which may be gathered from the writings of Thomas and from the Chronicles of Windesheim, and of Mt. St. Agnes.

Though à Kempis had much time for calm thought and deliberation during the period of his novitiate, it must not be imagined that he at all shrunk from entering upon a religious life, which entailed the entire surrender of himself and all he had—the powers of body and mind—to the service of his God and Saviour. No! for his heart was strongly bent upon such a heavenly calling. A deep enthusiasm stirred within his breast, a fervent zeal animated his soul, which

<sup>1</sup> Some of Gerard's prescriptions are worthy of being noticed, such as :—  
'Take pains that your sleep be sound.' 'Guard against eating quickly and greedily.' 'In very cold weather you may eat more than at other times.'  
'You may then also sleep an hour or half an hour longer.'



this season of preparation and probation was well calculated to deepen and strengthen, and bring to a mature and settled resolve. Fortunately à Kempis has left in his writings many passages, or fervid outpourings of his soul, which reveal to us the sentiments and feelings of his inner life during his early career at the Convent of St. Agnes. And there is one which seems very fitly to apply to his first calm moments when he obtained a settled place in the Brotherhood here. It affords us a beautiful transcript of the state of his soul at this solemn period : it tells of a still lingering conflict in his heart, but shows, nevertheless, how he gained strength from above to be confirmed in his resolution to adopt and persevere in a holy life by having recourse to God in prayer. It is here given as worthy of a place in these memorials, since it cannot fail to be highly profitable to earnest souls.

He begins his devout meditation, as usual, with a passage of Holy Scripture, which is in these pathetic words of the Psalmist, 'Lo, then would I get me away far off, and remain in the wilderness.'<sup>1</sup> Then he proceeds :

Oh, how salutary, how pleasant, and how sweet it is to dwell in solitude, to hold one's peace, and to speak with God, and so enjoy the sole chief good, in whom all good things are contained !

Would that I were so united to that most simple and only good, as to be moved by no affections and distractions of fleeting matters ; would that I did not yield to any visible things, by curiously fixing my gaze upon them and turning to them !

O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death ? Alas ! how often doth my soul die, because of the creatures which it loves ; how often for their sake doth it forget its Creator, and is led astray.

My unstable mind wishes now this, now that, is now here, now there, seeking after peace in the creature, and finding none ; for though every creature hath some delight in its use, yet it yields no satisfaction in its fruition.

Unsearchable indeed is the heart of man, and who can know it ? Thou, O God, knowest that the thoughts of man are but vain !

<sup>1</sup> Ps. lv. 7.

Then the pious devotee pours out his soul before God, conscious of infirmity, and of being often drawn down from the enjoyment of God by too great an attachment to earthly things, but longing for more spiritual freedom to rise above them, and to rest in the Creator. Notice what a yearning there is of the inner man.

O God eternal, supreme and infinite, the Creator and Governor of all things ; I am Thy creature whom Thou hast made by Thy power. I was made to love Thee, and now I would love Thee, but I am not able to do this as much as I desire.

I am bound by vain love and sinful affections for fading things, and when I endeavour to tear myself from them I can scarcely, or not at all, do so without great grief.

Oh, if Thou wert sweet and pleasant unto me, how quickly would they flee away and perish ! Nevertheless sometimes, by the intuition of my mind, I see Thy invisible things through those which are made, and Thee also the Supreme Good, the eternal God.

And it delights me to tarry in these meditations. But very soon, I know not by what gust of emotion, recalled from this study, and miserably weak, I am held by the love and bondage of things visible.

Lo, I firmly resolve in my heart—as if I had made a deed of covenant between me and Thee—that I would see and love no creature, because of Thy great and precious love, but despise all, and relinquish alike myself and all that I have.<sup>1</sup>

But afterwards the thoughts of this world and of the flesh, the kinswoman and neighbour of sin, rise up so sweetly in my heart, as if there were some happiness in them, and that I should lose some good if I despised them.

Feigning a pleasant appearance, but concealing a miserable end ; exhibiting that which is present, but silent of the evil that will follow, as if Thou must be sought everywhere and in all Thy creatures, and we were to reject or despise nothing, because evidently made by Thee, my God. And thus they allure me from my resolution, and at length draw me away altogether.

Oh, how vain, how deceitful, and well-nigh nothing are even existing and flourishing things found to be, for after a few transi-

<sup>1</sup> How much do these words remind one of those devout breathings of the soul in the *Imitation* ; see the first part of chap. xiii, book IV., and the latter part of chap. viii, book II. The expressions are different, but there is a unity of thought which must impress those who compare them.

tory delights they flee away, and leave me among the thorns and briars of a bad conscience !

Woe is me ! O Lord, yea, woe is me again ! because I have too soon assented and yielded to vanity, and have so readily forsaken Thee, Who art Truth. Oh, how great a sin have I fallen into in that, not laying aside all things, I did not cleave wholly to Thee !

For I was made to love and enjoy Thee, but by inordinately following created things I have lost Thee, and found no rest for my heart in them.

Convert me, O Lord, unto Thee, and leave me not to run after earthly things since Thou hast worthily promised the heavenly to them that follow Thee.<sup>1</sup>

In these words we cannot fail to see how Thomas à Kempis was possessed with the profound sentiment of St. Augustine, that since God made the soul for Himself, it would not find rest but in Him. We may perceive also what a momentous struggle and conflict was going on in his soul between the flesh and the spirit, and how greatly he fears to lose the favour and love of God by seeking his happiness in temporal enjoyments. In the words which follow we behold how he endeavours to brace his soul up to cleave faithfully to God, by contrasting the vanity of earthly consolation, with the abiding joy and blessedness of trusting in God and wholly possessing Him. What he says is well worth an attentive consideration. Beginning another chapter with the text, 'My soul refuseth comfort,'<sup>2</sup> he continues :—

Wander not, my soul, after vanities and false extravagances, but turn to the Lord thy God, for He is the fountain of all consolation.

Whatsoever thou seekest in man, or in the creatures thou wilt lose, and wilt be sensible of thy loss too, because, though they may have some semblance of good, yet is there nothing durable in them.

Why deceivest thou thyself for nought? It is folly to beg of a pauper, when the rich are willing to give in abundance.

Every creature is poor in respect of comfort, but God is rich

<sup>1</sup> *Soliloquium Animæ*, chap. ix.

<sup>2</sup> Ps. lxxviii. 2.

in grace, Who giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not, if thou wilt only seek diligently and wait patiently.

Return, my soul, return to Christ, in the secret of thine heart, as the dove did to Noah in the ark, because it is not safe to tarry long abroad.

Refuse to be comforted outwardly, if thou would'st be inwardly refreshed. Remain not with the raven outside the ark, but immediately fly away from the carcass. Return and, being hungry, Christ shall feed thee with the Bread of Heaven.

If necessity require, or infirmity keep thee some time or other attending to that which is without, tarry not; return speedily again within, lest thou perish beneath a deluge of words, or be taken captive in the snares of the enemy.

Many are the traps laid for souls that willingly wander abroad, and great the defences for the dove that soon returns: which, when it could find no rest for its feet, quickly returned to Noah in the ark.

Do thou then get thee to thy cell, and dwell there, and count it grievous to be elsewhere.

Happy is the soul whose conscience is clean before God, which is not captivated by any vain thing, which is neither polluted by the love, nor laid waste by the hatred, of any thing.

Happy is that soul which seeketh no consolation from any creature, but places all hope in God alone.

Happy is that soul which refuses all outward and temporal rest and whatever conduces to the conveniences of the flesh, and willingly embraces labour and want for Christ's sake.

Happy is that soul which entrusts herself to God, that He may do what seemeth good to Him.

Happy is that soul which never seeks her own glory; never desires her own will to be done; but designs, loves, and purposes the glory and will of God in all things.

Happy, in short, is that soul which weans herself from all things temporal, and keeps herself pure in all her actions, as in the sight of God.

Oh soul, that art in such a condition, rejoice and be exceeding glad, because thou canst now be engaged with the inner and heavenly, and canst praise God night and day.

Happy and blessed of God is that soul whose longings are raised upwards; whose hands and arms are stretched forth as the two wings of the cherubim; whose whole vigour and labour is interior, mounts upward, and returns not until she finds Him whom she loves beyond all others.



And when she hath found him, then forgetting all, she follows Him whithersoever the Beloved shall wish and shall lead her.

And when He has spoken she will rejoice at His voice, which says to her, 'I am solely thy Beloved, thine Elect. I am thy exceeding great reward. Be thou humble in prosperity, and strong in adversity.

'Behold how they that love Me are comforted by Me. How sweetly, thinkest thou, they will be treated when they have laid aside all the troubles of the body and soul, and shall be received up into eternal rest.'

O that I could enjoy such sweetness as a holy soul does that is beloved of God, and devoted to Him! when, the senses lulled, she is borne upwards in spirit, and raised above herself to the embraces of the Beloved, and is united to God by the bond of intimate love.

Then does this aspirant after a closer walk with God burst forth in fervent prayer, that God Himself would inspire, direct, and fit him for living such a blessed life. And we may observe in passing that there are incidental traces to be found in his words which appear to indicate his straining every nerve of his soul to attain that interior kind of life which he passed at Mount St. Agnes, and is more abundantly set forth in the '*De Imitatione Christi*.'

O my God! true Treasure of my heart, Thou art not ignorant that this would be the sole refreshment of my grief that is inwardly hidden.

Thou art the bestower and infuser of this unction. Thou teachest, Thou exhortest, Thou cherishest, Thou comfortest, Thou advancest, Thou sustainest.

Thou ledest forward, and bringest back, and doest what Thou wilt with the soul that Thou hast chosen, and all whatever Thou doest and willest is good.

But I, who am verily as a sour vessel, and unworthy of the infusion of Thy Spirit, pray that its sacred emanation may be increased within me, and that as far as I can I may be able to taste the sweetness of Thy internal love, and anticipate beforehand those holy delights which I know the soul that carefully waits on Thee frequently gains.

I have scented from afar the heavenly spices, when I have been meditating on the interior desires of the mind concerning a holy soul.

But Thou, O Lord, knowest how seldom and how feeble is my meditation on things eternal ! how constantly my words are dry ! how dark my understanding and how disturbed my conscience ! how confused my inward thoughts, how unenlightened and indevout, and that not from the fault of another, but from mine only.

Sometimes, however, whilst seeking a way to interior things, and taken up with meditations by myself in secret, I dwell fervently on the blessings of an elect soul : what heavenly joys and spiritual delights are within her heart, what peace, what tranquillity, what hope and rejoicing in God her Saviour, Whose speech is sweet, and Whose appearance is lovely. And though the stay be brief, yet the hour is full of rapturous delight.

In his eyes nothing on earth is to be compared to the divine life kindled and kept alive, and burning brightly, in the soul of man. The mind of Thomas was filled with the loftiest conception of it, how purely and devoutly it should be sought after, how tenderly and fervently it should be cherished. There was something mysterious in it to the carnal man, reaching on to, and dwelling in the unseen ; yet was there an abiding reality in it which was surpassingly sweet to the soul. Listen to some of his concluding words :—

Now when I think upon these things, and Thou enlightenest my darkness, I find many just causes of complaint against myself, and discover by the hidden chinks of grace that such and such a soul is closely united to Thee, and that thus and thus Thou speakest to her.

She is silent on all things open to the senses, and Thou speakest to her in the spirit concerning things invisible. She seems as if deserted by all creatures, and Thou consolest her in an ineffable manner.

Thus again I spake these words in my heart. Woe to the sinful soul, the burdened conscience, lukewarm life, not having the light of grace, nor spiritual consolation, seeking for tears and finding none.

Peace shall be to that soul which sincerely loves Christ, and never turns away the eyes of her heart from Him, but always asks what is pleasing to Him ; because she shall walk in peace and righteousness, and a stranger shall not intermeddle with her joy.

She will find how good it is to wait on Him, and shall taste how sweet the Lord her God is in Whom she trusteth.

She will remove herself far off from external tumults, and will wait for His coming to her inwardly, to her great advantage.

Behold ! thus doth God work in His chosen vessels. If any one come unto Him, he shall not return empty, for He willingly giveth water to the thirsty and bread to the hungry.

My God, when Thou enterest into the soul that loves Thee, wilt Thou not feed her with milk, and, out of the abundance of Thy sweetness, sometimes even lead her out of herself, to embrace Thee, without any bodily image ?

O truth, truth, how much does charity prevail and perform ! Then Thou speakest Thy word to that soul most secretly, and showest to her things new and old in charity, and in the most blessed fruition when all human words are ended.

Henceforward Thou makest her to trust most fully in Thee, concerning the eternal rest and the fellowship of the saints ; because, by giving beforehand an earnest of spiritual grace, Thou makest her stronger in hoping for that which is unseen, and in despising the present which is perceived by the senses.

Be mindful of me, a poor beggar, O gracious Father, through the bowels of Thy mercy, and send down the true Bread from Heaven, even Thy good Word full of consolation and grace.<sup>1</sup>

These devout breathings of the soul indicate the frame of mind in which à Kempis entered upon his novitiate at Mount St. Agnes. It is a pleasing task to picture him at this period as he dwelt in his cell, and went in and out among the pious Brethren ; how he would brace himself up to a diligent observance of rules, and the customary duties of the House, and to a renewed walk with God. There is quite sufficient evidence to show that he now gave particular attention to the cultivation and development of the interior life. Instead of being concerned, as young men of his age often are, about getting on in the world and securing a position for himself, he was solicitous only to advance

<sup>1</sup> *Soliloquium Animæ*, chap. x. I must again in passing draw the reader's attention to a peculiarity of thought, expression, and doctrine in these passages similar to what is found in the *Imitatio*. Especially as regards the dissatisfaction and disquietude of the soul in created things ; the greater enjoyment of religion and peace in God the less we look after human consolations ; and the seeking after God as the only chief good for man, as set forth in book III., chap. xxxi. See also the latter part of chap. viii. in book II. ; the latter part of chap. xii. in the same book ; and chap. xlii. in book III.

in heavenly grace, and in the love and favour of God his Saviour. Instead of following his own will and seeking occasions for self-indulgence and carnal gratification, he was most anxious to bring his will into conformity with God's will, and, by practising self-denial in many things, to keep under the desire of the flesh. And thus, little distracted or disturbed by ambitious designs for himself or unsatisfied cravings, he was free, ready, and forward to make every effort, and to use every means to become a perfect man in Christ. This was his desire, this his aim.

In addition to the Prescripts which Gerard had delivered to his followers, which the Brethren were diligent to observe, I shall now mention some further instructions which à Kempis gladly followed, founded upon what is usually called the Rule of the great Father of the Order of Canons Regular, St. Augustine. These the several members of the confraternity were enjoined to read over at least once a week.

What was called the Rule of St. Augustine as observed by the Brethren at Mount St. Agnes may be briefly summed up under the following heads:—

I. To observe the fundamental law of Love: first, towards God, then towards our neighbour, according to its just extent, and to imitate the example of the Mother Church of Jerusalem in union of heart, and in sharing with others the goods we possess.

II. To learn the lesson of Humility, according to the most perfect pattern set forth in the life of Christ, and in that of His nearest and most faithful followers; and especially in this, that the greatest among them should be as the younger, and he that is chief as he that doth serve.

III. To observe carefully the stated or canonical 'hours,' and times of prayer; and to prepare both body and soul for it by due retirement, meditation, and fasting.

IV. To take care that the soul and body be both fed at the same time, by a prudent appointment of some spiritual



entertainment at meals, as by reading some sacred book, or by a conference on holy matters, or by singing some devout songs or canticles.

V. To take charge of the sick and infirm wherever they be found, and so far as we are capable, and to do them all the service in our power for their bodily and spiritual welfare.

VI. To be without any affectation or singularity in dress, and in all the other externals of life; and to regard above all things the acquisition of internal purity and the fashioning our lives into a conformity to the will of God.

VII. Humbly and affectionately to give and receive fraternal correction and admonition from one another, meekly to confess our faults one to another, gladly to submit ourselves to the reproof or chastisement of our Superior, and resolutely keep up the true discipline of the Gospel.

VIII. To do all we possibly can for the general good and interest of the Community; to be diligent in our duties and callings, never to be idle, or to wander curiously about, and to be content with the distribution of the common funds, though not altogether so favourable to ourselves as might be expected.

IX. Not to neglect outward cleanliness and decency, but to look to the due discharge of outward things for the sake of the inward; and to take proper care of the body for the sake of the soul, both in health and sickness.

X. To be obedient to our Superior for God's sake, to faithfully and kindly observe our relative duties towards the other members of the Society, to be ready to ask pardon and to forgive offences in the spirit of Christ our Lord, but not so as to weaken authority.<sup>1</sup>

Here we have the sum and substance of the Rule by

<sup>1</sup> The supposed Rule of St. Augustine was at first placed under three heads; but it was afterwards extended according to the views and requirements of the respective Communities of the Order, though the main principles always remained intact, in all cases.

which Thomas à Kempis and his Brethren at Mount St. Agnes strove to regulate their lives. It was a plain, brotherly, yet righteous and Scriptural rule to aim after, and to govern their lives by, and from it and other counsels of holy living already noticed, we may in some degree more clearly perceive the manner of life which à Kempis followed; and in what a happy, peaceful, holy, loving, and obedient household or community, upon the whole, it was in which he dwelt. And need I add that such a rule of life is conducive to fostering and bringing forth the same blessed results in every Christian family or fraternity? It is the neglect of its several injunctions in any monastery or household that leads to the decay of piety, and the opening of the door to one evil or another, that brings a scandal or disgrace upon the Christian profession.

In the following extract, taken from one of his works, we have the sentiments of Thomas à Kempis respecting the kind of life he had just entered upon. The terms in which he describes a monastery may seem exaggerated to some minds, but we must remember that he had been very happy in such a place, and had seen and known what an unspeakable blessing it had been to many souls, and therefore we need not wonder that he should extol it. Beginning with a text of Scripture, as was his usual wont, which in this instance was, 'Glorious things are spoken of thee, thou city of God,' he thus speaks of the conventual life as pursued by the Brothers of Common Life:—

A well-founded cloister, separated from the tumult of the world, adorned with many Brethren and with sacred books, is acceptable to God, and to His saints. Such a place, it is piously believed, is pleasing to all that love God, and take a delight in hearing the things of God:

Because the cloister is the castle of the Supreme King and the palace of the Celestial Emperor, prepared for the dwelling of religious persons, where they may faithfully serve God.

Verily this place is holy, acceptable to God and His angels, terrible to devils, lovely to the devotees. It is much to be desired for the sake of obtaining the favour and blessing of God, and is delightful, sweet, and honourable.

For this is none other—as we read and sing of—than the House of God to pray in ; the Court of God to offer praise ; the Choir of God to sing unto Him ; the Altar of God whereon to celebrate ; the Gate of God whereby to enter Heaven ; the Ladder of God to rise above the clouds.

It is the Cemetery of God wherein to bury the dead ; the Hospital of God to receive strangers in ; the Refectory of God where the poor may be entertained and refreshed ; the Table of God where the sick and faint may communicate.

As the holy angels in Heaven are always praising God, and the stars in the firmament clearly declare His glory, so ought the religious, and the devout monks, rising in the night, to sing hymns and psalms in the choir, to offer praise to God, make glad the angels, drive away the devils ; and rouse themselves up by the sound of their own voices, lest they fall asleep.

As a noble city is preserved with walls and gates and bars, so also is the monastery of the religious with many devout Brethren, with sacred books, and with learned men. It is decorated with gems and precious stones to the praise of God, and to the honour of all His saints, who now rejoice in Heaven with Him because they followed in the footsteps of His passion on earth.<sup>1</sup>

Monasteries have not been viewed with much favour in the English Church. Great abuses formerly prevailed in them in this country, as well as abroad, and a great dread exists lest similar evils should again arise were such institutions to be revived, and that they would still be productive of more evil than good. Moreover they are thought to be unsuited to the spirit of the age, which is much opposed to the separation of religion from the common life. Something, however, may be said for them as well as against them, and it is a question well worth considering and thinking out by leading men, who are anxious for the spread of true religion, whether or not such institutions might not yet be made to some extent a blessing to this country, if fashioned with care, carried on wisely, and somewhat associated with the common life, after the pattern of those with which Thomas à Kempis was connected ; where, with plain living and constant work of a

<sup>1</sup> *Doctrinale seu Manuale Juvenum*, chap. vi. secs. 1, 2.

suitable character, a high tone of religious life might be maintained. Places—call them monasteries or not, or brotherhoods, sisterhoods, or with a simpler title, Christian settlements—where the members might live together in an unostentatious manner, with vows or without, or under agreement for a certain time, wearing simple clothing, not of too distinctive a character; where nevertheless a rigid discipline might be carried out, more time given to the service of God, to devout meditation, prayer, and reading, and self-culture of the mind and spirit; not that they should live unto themselves, or seclude themselves from their fellow-men, but trying to imitate the life of Christ, after the manner of some of the primitive Christians, ‘who had all things common,’ and ‘were of one heart and one mind;’ they should be most diligent—the first and foremost and most persevering—in all good works, going in and out among men with this very purpose, not having a thought of their own individual advancement, interests, or credit, but having the welfare of their fellow-creatures near them constantly in view; they should constantly endeavour to draw those whom they could influence to think less of themselves and of the world, to live nearer to God, to prepare more for the life to come, and to heed less what should befall them in this present life, so long as they had food and clothing, so that they might but gain at last the heavenly inheritance provided for them. Not only might such institutions be the means of raising up among us more saint-like characters than we have at present, but might be a refuge for many weary, forlorn souls, who have found the emptiness of all that the world has to offer, and a help to them in attaining to that eternal rest for which they long; might largely conduce to lead many other Christians who have to engage in worldly business to strive after a higher Christian life than they are wont; and might produce and provide us with a class of men and women better fitted from their habits of simplicity, order, obedience, self-denial, and devotion, to do much effective



work among the spiritually destitute, who want some one to speak to them about their souls and to care for them.

Monasteries, if properly carried on, are not in themselves evil. They become so by wrong management, to which the best of institutions are liable. That abuses have crept in aforesaid is no argument against their value, any more than what may be advanced against the most perfect of human systems, yea, even against the Church itself. I do not advocate the conventual life as the only mode or way of reaching Christian perfection ; I only plead for it as one among other methods, and as one that is overlooked and neglected, which might be of costly worth to the Church. We are not all constituted alike, any more than we are all in like circumstances, or alike of one height ; and there is no reason why the Christian life should be always cut after one pattern and to one measure, after some procrustean idea ; it does not seem right or Scriptural ; and the world around us suffers from not having a higher standard kept before it of the Christian life. Some persons are capable of higher attainments of grace and of the Divine life than others ; they have stronger desires than others to give themselves wholly to God and the good of their fellow-men, which others have not, and are not capable of attaining in the same degree. And why should not they be permitted and encouraged to do this in the way just indicated ? The rule of our Saviour on such matters, which will apply to such a condition of life, is, ‘ He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.’ And it seems to be but the offspring of a carping, prejudiced, envious spirit to condemn, underrate or speak disparagingly of a higher state or rule of life than that which we may feel ourselves equal to, or not called upon to embrace. It would show a more noble and liberal spirit were we to try and find, and acknowledge, what was good and valuable in such means, and see if there were not some beauty, worth, and sanctity in such a manner of life, different from our own indeed, which we might admire and approve.

Safeguards—such as a dutiful obedience to Church

authority, and a loyal adherence to her fellowship and principles—and a constant effective supervision, would be essentially necessary for the successful working of such institutions ; but, given these, is it not possible that monasteries, after a reformed character, might largely meet a requirement of our time and country, and be of great use to the advancement of true religion, a precious boon and desideratum for many earnest souls ?

The monastery where à Kempis had recently found a home was in its very infancy ; scarcely a year and a half had passed since it had been duly constituted, and its first Prior elected. There had been, however, for some time previous to this, a House for the Brothers of Common Life in the immediate neighbourhood, which paved the way for the establishment of a monastery. Many difficulties and privations had to be overcome and endured ere the latter fairly struggled into existence. Thomas à Kempis gives an account of these ; and in the next chapter I propose to recount the more interesting of the particulars he relates, introducing them with some information respecting the character and history of the neighbouring town of Zwolle, which was in sight of Mount St. Agnes, where there was a Brother-House of the Society, and where à Kempis had a few warm friends.

## CHAPTER XVI.

A description of the town of Zwolle—Its history and inhabitants—The Sassenpoort, the Churches, and environs—The first settlement of the Brothers of Common Life in the above town—The conversions by Gerard in Zwolle—His followers induce him to select a place for them out of the town—The commencement of the House and the help obtained—Some of the first members—Their life of poverty, toil, and discipline—Their devotion to God and loving fellowship cheer and sustain them—The straits to which they were at times reduced—Relieved by Everard and others—The opposition and animosity they encounter—The consecration of the Chapel—The building of the monastery projected.

THE pretty town of Zwolle, where the bones of Thomas à Kempis are now to be found, and near to which he lived for so many years, is entirely surrounded by water, being situated between two small rivers, the Zwartewater, which here makes its junction with the Yssel. It is entered by three or four drawbridges; and along the banks of the streams there are a few better houses, with pleasant gardens dipping down to the water. In the broader parts of the stream several vessels ply up and down, among which are three small steamers, one of which goes to Amsterdam. There are now about 20,000 inhabitants in Zwolle, of whom about 15,000 are Protestants and 5,000 Roman Catholics. It forms the capital of the province of Over-Yssel; and, in addition to its beautiful promenades, possesses some fine streets and pretty squares, which give it, 'pardon the expression,' says a modern writer, 'a very saucy look.' The commerce of the place is considerable; and the number of carts passing through the streets—which in the interior of the town are lined with shops—the busy, active habits of the people, and the crowded market-places, all show that a thriving trade is carried on. There is an order, cleanliness, and respectability observable too, which

it was pleasing to notice. The people seemed happy and contented, not sluggishly so, like the Italians, or those in the East, for all seemed to have something to do, and went about their work with a will and purpose. In the early part of the evening, at the time of the year when I visited the town, several groups of children were playing in the streets, joining hands together, talking freely and laughing merrily ; and later on a military band played some lively tunes under the trees in the large square near St. Michael's Church ; while the young men and maidens thronged the promenade and paced up and down amidst their elders, who were among them, enjoying the evening air and gossiping with their friends.

A pleasing writer, speaking of the place, says : ' One would scarcely imagine in looking at all these charming streets, clean, coquettish, and prettily arranged houses and grand shops abundantly provided, that the existence of this charming city had four or five times been in danger of destruction from war, flood, and fire. In 1324 Zwolle was on the point of being completely destroyed by flames during the night of St. Marguerite (July 20-21), in which more than 500 houses were burnt down, for these houses being constructed of wood, easily fell a prey to the destroyer. The little Church of Bethlehem with its clock-tower took fire in the midst of this conflagration, and the tongues of flame, mounting high into the heavens, were seen at enormous distances, to the stupefaction of the surrounding populations. Since then fire has broken out on several occasions, and partially defaced the city, but the consequences were trifling compared to the one referred to in 1324. Laid waste by fire, Zwolle was not spared by water. On November 1, 1571, on February 14, 1651, November 21, 1775, January 1784, and in 1799, and even in the present century in 1825, the town was inundated to such an extent that the streets were flooded, and the inhabitants were forced to go about in boats. Perhaps the last was the most severe of these disastrous inundations ; but fortunately the damage was not beyond the power of the rich



towns-people to rectify, and in a few months the wounds the Yssel had caused were healed over.

‘Added to these calamities of fire and water, the pretty town of Zwolle fell a victim to pestilential diseases, which ravaged the population to a fearful extent. Perhaps there is no town in Holland which has suffered so considerably from epidemics of all kinds as Zwolle. In 1398, the year before Thomas came there, the plague, called the black sickness (*peste noire*), devastated the poor city for the space of many months, carrying off victims at the rate of eighty a day, and not only from the town itself, but from the outlying villages, a rate of mortality which was enormous in proportion to the number of the inhabitants. The summer of 1422 was almost as fatal to the population as that of 1398, the number of deaths being so increased that they could not find grave-diggers to bury the dead. In 1440, 1450, 1453, 1458, during which years Thomas à Kempis still lived not very far off, this epidemic raged with violence; and in 1602 such a large number of inhabitants fell victims to the plague that the cemeteries surrounding the Church of Bethlehem, and that of the Brothers of Common Life, were closed, being too crowded to hold any more. In 1655 it reappeared with such violence that a meeting was called among the inhabitants to discuss plans for stopping its ravages. Every precaution was taken, and hospitals built specially for those affected, but in vain; the number of deaths increased to such an extent that lawyers and attorneys were overworked, and not sufficient in number to draw up the wills and bequests of the dying: to obviate which inconvenience the municipality decreed that a will attested by three persons, and placed in the hands of the magistrates before three days had elapsed, should be looked upon as binding, and be regarded as completely valid.

‘Since then the plague has not again made its appearance; and only occasional outbreaks of fever and cholera have occurred, but made no greater havoc there than in other large towns of the country: and since then this

pretty town has always remained as bright, joyous, and coquettish as she appears now to those who visit her for the first time. The churches and a few rare old houses are the principal remarkable monuments, besides a grand old gate-house with its fine pointed spires. This gate-house is called the "Sassenpoort," and is the only one remaining out of several ; its massive form rising above the houses which surround it (which take the place of the ancient city walls) with an air of proud superiority. It is built in a very high massive square. At the angles are four octagon-shaped turrets, which about a third of their height up swell out, and rest on trilobed modillions, terminating in an open gallery, and crowned with a pointed roof. The doorway is arched, above which is, first, a small niche, formerly containing the statue of St. Michael, and then a couple of large windows ; above which there is a fine arch with a small covered gallery, three windows and two niches, the machicolations of which are coated with plaster. The towers, as also the massive centre, are lighted by enormous windows, grated with large iron bars, and in the centre of the four pointed spires rises a heavy campanile, about a century old, with a chiming clock, which gives the merry inhabitants of Zwolle an opportunity of making a joke when strangers visit their town. The beauty of this gate makes one very much regret the destruction of the others, which happened in 1647, at the command of the vanquishing army. This same Sassenpoort served once upon a time as a trap to Charles Egmont, Duke of Gueldres, who came to Zwolle to make a treaty with the inhabitants. They opened the outer gates only, and shut them as soon as the Duke was inside. To recover his liberty the Duke was obliged to sign a treaty very favourable to the inhabitants.'

The only two churches in Zwolle which are interesting from an archæological point of view are Notre Dame and St. Michael, of which the latter is certainly the most important and the most beautiful. This was the church in the rebuilding of which Thomas à Kempis took much interest,

since he attended the indulgence granted for its restoration, and could behold it from a distance rising above the surrounding houses. They did not build their churches so quickly in those days as now, for it is said to have been forty years before it was actually completed. 'Like the greater number of churches built in Holland at that period, it is not constructed in the form of a cross, but has three naves of equal height and breadth, with brick vaulted roofs, supported by oblong square pillars, having at each side three tores at the base, and capitals corresponding to the three mouldings of the vaulted roofs. Strictly speaking this church has neither transept nor choir, but each nave terminates in the three sides of the octagon, the centre one forming a choir, divided from the rest of the building by a wall and a magnificent carved wainscoting, dating from 1597, which rare specimen of Renaissance has been desecrated by being painted in marble, and daubed over with several coats of colour. The exterior of the church is chiefly noticeable for its jutting buttresses, and the grand simplicity of its style. The tower is of more recent date. Notice, however, should be taken of one stone, a very flat bas-relief, which remains of the ancient church built upon the site in 1040, and is now inserted in the east wall of the present church. Eyke van Zinglichem, in his book on the Ancient Church in the Low Country, says that this bas-relief represents the patriarch Abraham, surrounded by three saints. But it is more probable that it is intended to represent Christ and His three Apostles. Whichever it may be, it is one of the rarest specimens of the eleventh century architecture and sculpture in the country.

'Before quitting this church some mention should be made of the pulpit, which is a magnificent structure with a raised roof of four or five tops, having a number of columns, porticoes, pinnacles and pyramids ending in crescents. Its date is 1620, and is considered a grand monument, though the taste of its style is not perfect.'

The other church, Notre Dame, belongs to the Roman Catholics, and dates from the end of the fourteenth cen-

ture. It is built entirely of bricks without colateral naves, but with a transept and an arched roof of brick also.

The immediate environs of the town offer to the inhabitants many charming spots for excursion and recreation. There is one lovely promenade, through an avenue of trees a hundred years old, to a place called 'Katerveer,' where on Sundays the inhabitants flock in crowds to enjoy the beauty of the landscape and the exquisite delight of the long walk. From Katerveer one can see the Yssel winding its silvery waters through green meadows and wooded knolls, like an enormous serpent folding its coils on a green velvet carpet. Nothing can be more charming than this beautiful country; and the pleasing impression it produces at first sight is greatly enhanced by coming suddenly upon it after wandering for some time in a monotonous country, full of flats, where the only thing that forms a line against the horizon is a sheep grazing or a cow chewing its cud.

We need only now to add a short anecdote about the inhabitants of Zwolle. Once they possessed, it is said, a famous peal of bells; but for some reason they sold it to the burgesses of Amsterdam, and it is now in the Westerkirk. To vex the Zwollenarens, who probably thought they had made a good bargain, the Amsterdamers paid the money in brass coin, which was so troublesome to count that the fingers of the counters turned blue; and from this circumstance it arises that the inhabitants of Zwolle are nicknamed 'blue-fingers.'<sup>1</sup>

The succeeding annals of the monastery at Mount St. Agnes will show that the contiguity of the town of Zwolle frequently affected its interests. Previous to the founding of the monastery a settlement of the Brothers of Common Life was established here. There are many interesting details respecting it, and the story of its commencement, as told by à Kempis in his *Chronicles*, is substantially as follows:—

<sup>1</sup> For many of the particulars here given, the author is indebted to *La Hollande*, by Plantenga, and, *The Dead Cities of the Zuyder Zee*, by Henry Havard, translated by Annie Wood.



There were in the city of Zwolle certain faithful men, wholly converted to God by Master Gerard the Great. These men had built for themselves a House in a certain quarter of the city, near to the old Convent of the Beguines, where they might collectively serve God with all humility and devotion. The chief among these were John de Ummen—a man dedicated to God and much beloved by Master Gerard—Wychmann Rurinck, and Reyner Leon de Rhine, with two or three other men of like good character. A certain clergyman, also dwelling in the same neighbourhood, joined them, named Wittecoep, to whom they gave heed, for he discoursed very fervently upon sacred subjects. The mother of John de Ummen, Regeland by name, a widow of mature years, also joined them, who carefully looked after the House, and faithfully ministered to the servants of God, as Martha did to our Lord. These individuals listened most diligently to the Word of God. But it is reported of her, that when a certain person did not read correctly and hesitated in his interpretation of it, she said to him in the fervour of her devotion, ‘Do not rend or spoil the Word of God, but cease to read, lest those who listen be offended at it through you. Let another read who knows better, that we may all understand and be edified.’ Thus she seems to have exercised some authority in the House, and to have had a pious care that the Bible, then to be translated from Latin into German, should not be read incorrectly or with a doubtful air, but by one competent to undertake it properly. After some time this good woman, the mother of Ummen, died, and for three days her son abstained from all food. It was towards the close of the holy season of Lent, and it was not till Easter Day dawned that he again began to eat and drink; yet he still retained his health of body and mind, and was as if he had been well refreshed every day. Whilst these servants of God were thus living together in holy poverty, many persons wishing to lead a devout life were drawn to them out of the world, and, desiring to serve God, they relinquished the world in the hope of eternal gain.

On one occasion during a Lenten season the venerable Master Gerard came to Zwolle, and for the purpose of strengthening his sons in the faith, he for several days exhorted them in things necessary to their souls' welfare. Very solicitous was he to draw them from the love of the world, and refresh them with the word of comfort. When, therefore, a great multitude of people were assembled to hear him preach, many devoutly submitted themselves to his counsels. Sometimes, therefore, being desirous of resuscitating them with the wine of the Lord, he would deliver two sermons in one day. And on these occasions, when he had fixed to preach in the afternoon as well as in the morning, he would spend the intervening moments in the church fasting and praying, or would perambulate about the cemetery for the purpose of meditation, whilst he awaited the return of the people. And so eager were certain persons to hear his pious discourses, and unwilling to be diverted from them, that they tarried either in the church or cemetery, in order that they might occupy convenient places about the pulpit, so that they might have the advantage of hearing the Word of God clearly delivered, at the appointed hour. And being greatly restored by the faithful preaching of Gerard, they would return to their own homes with glad hearts, rejoicing and praising God for all the things they had heard. It was not merely his eloquent persuasive manner of preaching, that exercised such a powerful influence upon the minds of his hearers, but the consciousness that the words came from the heart of a true servant of the Most High God, as was openly manifest in his manner of life and bearing towards all men. For they were much astonished and edified by the humble demeanour of the master ; that a man of so great a fame and knowledge, and accustomed to associate with great and notable people, should walk through the street in such plain garments, caring nothing for worldly applause, but seeking to gain many souls to God. Moreover he had a joyful countenance and a sweet mode of address, and was so affable to all, that any in the neighbourhood, or strangers

from a distance, however poor or unlearned they might be, could freely speak unto him, and listen to him as he discoursed to them concerning God. And, adds Thomas à Kempis, the good saw this and rejoiced ; but the wicked gnashed upon him with their teeth, and cursed.

One there was among these citizens more bold than the rest, who as yet took greater pleasure in worldly things than in those pertaining to the kingdom of God, that came to him, questioning his words and actions. 'Why,' said he, 'do you disquiet us, and why do you introduce new customs? Give up this kind of preaching, and do not trouble and terrify men.' He at once and wisely replied, 'I cannot willingly suffer you to go to hell.' To which the other indignantly answered, 'You must, however, permit us to go to hell in peace.' To this the benign and pious master said, 'This I cannot do. If you do not wish to hear me, there are others who will willingly listen to me.' But to return to our subject. When, therefore, the beloved master, for the sake of preaching the Word, had prolonged his stay in Zwolle for some time, certain of his disciples, dwelling in that place, mindful of the above-named opposition, went to him privately, and preferred a request that they might live in a more secluded place by themselves, because they could not continue as they were, buffeting with these worldly men, without injury to their souls. They then besought him, with filial affection, that he would of his paternal regard go with them a little way without the gates of the city to look for a suitable place of retirement. He graciously listened to their request, and appointed the following day to accompany them on their search. And taking with him the brethren Wychmann, Reyner, Henry, and Jacob Wittecoep, he departed with them towards Mount Nemel, a secluded spot, where they would be rarely disturbed by the coming and going of men. And yet even here, as will be seen, among the hills and valleys, briars and thorns sprang up.

When they set out, however, as Thomas à Kempis tells the tale, the weather was very unfavourable ; but neither

the wind nor the rain retarded their master from starting on his journey with them. For he went forwards joyfully, and said sweetly to his companions, 'I will go first and shield the wind from you with my gown.' On approaching the place where they took a turn in the mount, and while surveying the circuit of the hills a short space, they beheld a certain valley, both narrow and deep towards the north side, and his disciples said unto him, 'Behold, beloved master, how excellent and secluded a spot this is, to which we may retire for the love of Christ, and where we may lie hid, just as the holy hermit fathers did in the mountains and caves of the earth.' But the wise and prudent man withstood their suggestion, and dissuaded them from the idea, because the place was low in situation, neither was it by any means a desirable locality on the score of health for those who should succeed them. Therefore, carefully retracing their steps, they visited another mount in the vicinity; on beholding a level ground suitable for corn lying towards the south, the sagacious man said to those standing about him, 'Behold, at the foot of this mountain fix your tabernacle, since you will be able to prepare the level portion as a garden for herbs for yourselves, and where you can have fruit-trees also. And if God spare my life I will often come here to be with you.' Considering their inspection and survey had been inspired by God, they once more retraced their steps, committing the issue of events to the good pleasure of God. But alas! in the same year the much beloved Master Gerard, the glory and light of devotion in the province of Utrecht, was taken from the world that he might enjoy the reward of his labours, ascending from the valley of our tears to the mount of eternal blessedness.

Not long after this, however, the work was taken in hand. The new plant which had taken root in the hearts of a few was not without fruit, for there were many prayers sent up to heaven that their land might in due time bring forth abundantly to the glory of God. The above-named individuals did not neglect to prosecute the work they had



at first conceived in their minds. Moreover, at that time Jacob, the son of Thomas Coep, a certain counsellor of the city of Zwolle, came forward, and, taking upon himself the principal part in the sacred work, laboured to the utmost of his ability to found in this mount a House for the servants of God. Very shortly after this, Gossuin Tyasen, who afterwards became a Canon Regular of Windesheim, trusting in the good pleasure of God, joined him in the work, for his heart was thoroughly inflamed with the desire to further the building of the place.

Having obtained a portion of land from two proprietors of the soil, viz., Bercem, and Nemel, in the place indicated by Gerard as a site where they might build a House, these two, with the help of other friends, proceeded to lay the foundation in the hope of future blessings; a certain matron handing over to them a small humble tenement on the mount wherewith to commence operations.

In building the House they were often in want of materials, and had to endure many hardships. When they wanted to eat they must either bring food with them, or return to Zwolle; they were very poor, but some of their Brethen, who wished for its completion, would at times come and visit them, and, remaining all night, would sleep on the straw in their garments. Other inconveniences and difficulties they had to encounter, but, sustained and animated by a holy joy and sweet enthusiasm, that they were building for themselves, and for others of like mind, an habitation away from the turmoil and strife of the world, where they might live and serve God in all godly quietness, they in the fulness of their hearts toiled on; and thus the good work advanced, till at last, through various obstacles, it was brought to a completion.

This religious House having been constructed on the mount, and a number of devout men being gathered together to serve God in humility and simplicity, the farmers Bercem and Nemel, owners of the soil, gave and assigned to them and to their successors a further grant of land, where they had chosen a place for preaching and for

the worship of God. Many honourable persons also contributed to this pious expense. All was finished and completed, however, A.D. 1386, just a year and a half after the death of Gerard.<sup>1</sup>

Thomas à Kempis then proceeds to give an account of some of the first members of the Brotherhood here, their increase, how they fared, and how they endeavoured to live in fraternal love, and to serve God with fervency and faithfulness. These are the names of a few of the primitive Brothers and devout men who began to build and to inhabit the House.

The first was John Wittecoep,<sup>2</sup> the principal promoter of the House, and a solicitous helper in every way. This man was afterwards made a priest in Zwolle, waited upon the altar, and witnessed a good confession.

The second was John de Ummen, son of Assitrinus. He was blind and without learning, yet was he the familiar friend, as well as a devout disciple of Gerard the Great, and the Rector of the House.

The third was Wychmann Rurinck, an example of poverty and of patience, who, having a great number of friends, became a humble hearer of Gerard, and Procurator for this very poor community.

To these three principal men there were also associated other honest-minded individuals, who were happily attracted by the odoriferous fame of this new and sacred community to forsake the world. The names of these other men of good memory, continues à Kempis, are worthily to be praised; because they were bright examples of holy poverty, obedience, chastity, and daily labour. The first among them was Reyner Leon de Rhine, who, having travelled much about for the sake of devotion, afterwards became a convert of Gerard, and renounced the world. The second was named Reyner also, a junior in age, but

<sup>1</sup> Thomas à Kempis, *Chron. Mt. St. Agnes*, pp. 1-8.

<sup>2</sup> This was probably the same person as Jacob Coep, mentioned a little before, the members of whose family might occasionally be called 'Wittecoep, from some circumstance or other.

without guile, who had become enured to labour. The third had been the cook at the House in Deventer—he afterwards became the porter at Mount St. Agnes. He was an ardent worker, and devout in conversation. All these knew Gerard whilst living, and frequently heard him preach the Word of God to the people.

Through these humble, simple-minded, devout servants of God—true despisers of the world—the House on Mount Nemel was founded. The monastery at Mount St. Agnes was not then begun. To these pious men also, after a short time, very many devout clerics gradually joined themselves, with laymen from the neighbouring towns and the more distant parts; obtaining food day by day for themselves by the labour of their own hands. None were idle, none were permitted to wander about from curiosity; neither were they inclined to converse about terrestrial things, but were all instructed to labour in certain secular callings for the common good. Frequently did they offer up prayers to God, after the manner of the saintly fathers in Egypt, who laboured with their hands, but yet did not cease from prayer during the hours of work. This precept also they received from their master Gerard: that no one should be accepted unless he were willing to labour with his hands, and to enter upon the common life which they led. Therefore the devout clerics wrote out the books of the Holy Scriptures, and the lay brothers vigorously occupied themselves in tilling the ground, or in some other like manual labour. Some pursued the business of making shoes, others of fabricating woollen or linen textures. Certain men made baskets and pots, and others performed various little works for the use of the House, according to the judgment of the Rector. Outwardly, indeed, they led a life of poverty and toil for Christ's sake, but a love of the celestial life sweetened their resolute abstinence. If one of their number had to go abroad on some matter of business, he offered a short prayer to God before setting out. For a long time, therefore, they were thus accustomed to live a social life; and this was continued when the monastic

institution was set on foot, since all the devout clerics and laics were humbly obedient to their first Rector, John de Ummen—a very active man and well skilled in spiritual matters.

So diligently did they observe the virtue of obedience that no one dared even to fix a nail in the wall, or do the least thing without the knowledge of the Rector or Procurator. Fraternal correction was administered for the least negligence, and the Brother enjoined that he must be more guarded for the future; nor was any mere excuse allowed, but everyone had humbly to acknowledge his fault, and make a profession of prompt amendment. If anyone was not prepared to obey, or pertinaciously persevered in his own opinion, Father John reproved him severely, and pronounced a sentence according to the measure of the fault, and the quality of the individual. Sometimes also he was incited to a greater display of discipline in order to inspire a salutary fear in others, and would say to certain contentious persons, and to such as did not readily obey his injunctions: ‘Behold, the door is open; if anyone wishes to go, let him depart.’ Thus they must either behave better and yield a ready obedience, or leave the Society.

Yet among all these trials, and though engaged with important matters, the Rector was of a sympathetic and benign disposition, for he had the rare grace of comforting all that came to him, whatever their cause of grief. On this account it was that Gerard, whilst alive, sent many to him, that he might instruct them in the way of God, saying: ‘Go to blind John de Ummen, a devout and virtuous man, and whatever he tells you to do, do it.’ Concerning whom also he gave this testimony, that ‘the blind man saw better than all the people that dwelt in Zwolle.’ For though he lacked corporeal light, yet was he inwardly illuminated with the light of truth; and to many that came to him, he showed the way of eternal salvation, and was manifestly a holder forth of the true light.

There was moreover among the primitive Brethren such



a vehement fervour of delight in each other's society, that one could hardly do enough by lowly deeds to gain the regard of another; who in turn was himself inflamed to yield compliance to the wishes of his comrade. Thus when one of the Brethren wished to be quiet, the other, if desirous of rising earlier, would silently finish what he had to do. Or again, if anyone was slower than usual in his work, he who was more expert would take the place of the more tardy and complete what was wanted; and so the matter in hand was accomplished whilst the doer of it remained unknown. 'Thus charity,' continues Thomas à Kempis, 'was displayed in every work, and humility was treasured up in the heart, according to what is bidden, "Love to be unknown." And all who dwelt there were incited with a like devotion to perform lowly works, and humble exercises.' Hence the devout clerics and those engaged in making fabrics did not refuse to take part in the labours of the field; for, on being called, they went with the rest in the time of harvest to gather in the fruits of the earth with their hands; they took part in making hay, in digging up the soil, and in planting trees and herbs, as necessity required and from obedience, as each was summoned to the performance of it for the public good. Thus, like holy David, they were joyfully comforted in good works, praising God and saying, 'Thou shalt eat the labour of thine hands: happy shalt thou be, and well shall it be with thee.'<sup>1</sup>

In the next chapter Thomas alludes to the penury experienced by the Brethren in the early days of the House, both as regards food and clothing, and how God wonderfully provided for them. 'Who can tell,' he exclaims, 'the poorness of their sustenance whilst thus engaged in daily labour? Their food was very simple, their drink weak, and their clothing rough and plain. Hence there was no indulgence of the flesh, and yet enough to satisfy the wants of the body. Labouring constantly, they were wont to allay their hunger with cabbages and savoury

<sup>1</sup> Ps. cxviii. 2.

pottage. Rarely had they fish given to them, and more rarely eggs ; whence a certain person said, "Pleasure is brief, where poverty long prevails ;" yet sometimes to the infirm and sick a little grace was conceded. There were among them those who had been otherwise brought up in the world, but using great force with themselves were now content with few and common things. These they patiently accepted for Christ's sake, Who said, "The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force." At times, when they had finished dinner, scarcely anything remained in the House for distribution on the following day, and sometimes indeed they lacked food. But God, the Creator, who a long time ago furnished food for His people in the wilderness, did not forsake these Brethren in the Mount.<sup>1</sup>

It happened on one occasion that having consumed almost all the food, the cook was in great distress, and made known to Father John their lack of means for the morrow, saying, 'What shall I provide for to-morrow ?' The worthy rector consoled his distress with gracious words, and exhorted him to have confidence in God, who never forsook those who put their trust in Him. And so it happened that late in the evening of that very day, behold Father Everard de Eza, the curé of Almelo, came unexpectedly in his vehicle, as if he had been sent by God for the consolation of the poor Brethren, who was received by them with much consideration and alacrity, since he brought in an opportune hospitality. For he loved the House, and all who dwelt there, on account of their exalted poverty and simplicity of manners, and because they were themselves mindful to hurt no one, but were profitable to all men. He was also united to Father John in the special bonds of love. On which account when it was needful for him to take a journey to Windesheim or Zwolle, he gladly called upon the Brethren in the Mount on his way thither. This excellent pastor and most skilful physician, then, descending from his carriage, restored the souls of the needy with

<sup>1</sup> *Chron. Mt. St. Agnes*, chap. iii.

the food of sacred words, whilst he did not neglect to revive the hearts of those who were cast down by providing food necessary for their bodily support. For he always brought with him a present of fine flour and some meat, which he gave to the Brethren in common. Thus by these gifts they were not a little comforted, and returned thanks to God for his loving-kindness in succouring them with food in so great a strait.

Thomas à Kempis makes mention also of the kindness of Gerard Bronchorst, a canon of Utrecht, 'a great lover of the Devotees,' who had been preferred to Deventer, where he died. He specially alluded to the gift of two cows which the aforesaid benefactor made to the Brethren in the Mount. But, adds Thomas, 'God was pleased in this matter to try their patience and increase their faith, for one of these cows died, whilst the other continued in sound health.' But here the wonderful goodness of God was again manifest, for this remaining cow yielded such an abundance of milk that it sufficed for all, so that it was thought that they could not have obtained more from the two by ordinary estimate. Then the word of the prophet Isaiah, says Thomas, seemed to be fulfilled which said, 'In that day it shall come to pass that a man shall nourish a cow . . . and for the abundance of milk that shall be given he shall eat butter.'<sup>1</sup>

Many other little acts of kindness are named ; as, for instance, when certain persons from Zwolle came to fish in the river Vetch, and inviting some of the poor Brethren to assist them, they cast their nets in the name of Jesus, and caught an innumerable quantity of the fish, which they kindly gave to them. This fish, so freely tendered, was much esteemed at the time ; for at the beginning of their foundation, as Thomas intimates, the Brethren were much despised by

<sup>1</sup> Isai. vii. 21, 22. This passage, Bp. Louth says, contains an elegant and very expressive description of a country depopulated, where there is much grass left, so that the few cattle have an abundant pasture, so as to yield milk in plenty to the scanty family of the owner. Such an appropriate allusion shows how well versed our author was in the Holy Scriptures.

worldly people, and were often openly derided by those who passed by, and called them by opprobrious names ; and further, that they had to endure many contentions and molestations, arising from jealousy. But the patience of the pious Brethren overcame the maliciousness of the wicked. And the enjoyment of a good conscience brought them greater gladness, by reason of the contempt they had to pass through. For though there were some of these worldly people who insulted Christ by their malevolence to the poor, and were not afraid to calumniate the innocent, yet there were others that feared God, commended the devout conversation of the Brethren, and moved by pity, assisted them with gifts and personal aid. An example of the mode in which they were treated is given in the following anecdote :—A certain lay-brother of good repute on one occasion was occupied in feeding a few sheep, and was leading them from one pasture to another, when he met on the way a certain old man, who began to cast foul words at him, and to say many hard things. To all this rough behaviour the devout Brother courteously replied, ‘ Good master, why do you so openly tell me of my shortcomings, and say such hard things, when I only desire to do what is right ? ’ Hearing these words the old man presently came to himself, and at once changing his voice, said, ‘ What advantage is it to me that you should go to the kingdom of heaven, and that I should go to hell ? ’ For he perceived, adds Thomas, that he only brought upon himself an accession of wrath by his objurgations, and an increase of punishment by his evil conduct. Thus it happened, as it is written in the book of Proverbs, ‘ A soft answer turneth away wrath.’ Thomas à Kempis concludes the chapter by saying, ‘ It is not unpleasant to relate these few matters concerning the early operations of our senior Brethren.’<sup>1</sup> They were evidently such as greatly interested him, and were closely connected with his own life.

We have next an account given of the consecration of the first chapel in Mount St. Agnes, and the dedication of the

<sup>1</sup> *Chron. Mt. St. Agnes*, chap. v.



first altar to the honour of St. Agnes, and the Blessed Mary Magdalene, by Herbert, the suffragan Bishop of Utrecht. This took place on the vigil of John the Baptist's day in the year 1395. And then it is added that, on the Sunday after the Nativity of St. John, Master Reyner, Curé of Zwolle, came, and was the first that solemnly sang mass in it, offering to God the sacrifice of perpetual praise,<sup>1</sup> for he entertained a gracious friendship and fellowship with the Brethren. From that day, therefore, the sacred Mystery of our Redemption was unceasingly celebrated in this place for the Brothers ; and on holy days, that they might be incited to greater devotion of soul, they refreshed themselves by singing the Divine praise. A large number of the Brethren were inflamed to a higher love of Divine worship by these sacred services, and having a special place set apart for them. In after time, however, a new and larger church was built and consecrated for the monastery, and the dedication of the early chapel was transferred by pontifical license to that which was more suitable.

Thomas à Kempis, in his preface to the *Chronicles of St. Agnes*, states that among the things narrated to them by a senior Brother of the first habitation in the Mount, was this, that before ever the monastery was begun, or any of the men had come thither for the service of God, the shepherds and other people living in the neighbourhood had intimated to them that they had frequently beheld, as it were in a vision, men clothed in white robes walking in procession round the Mount. Whether the rumour that a monastery would one day be erected on the Mount had so worked upon their imagination that their fancy drew the picture for them, or some mysterious intimation or vision of what should be was given to them, we do not stay to consider. Thomas accepts it, and says, 'What this signified or portended was afterwards, in the course of time, sufficiently made known when a monastery was built by the grace of God, in which were the Canons Regular clothed

<sup>1</sup> 'Offerens Deo sacrificium laudis perpetuæ.'

in white vestments, who served God devoutly with psalms and hymns, celebrating mass, and daily observing the canonical hours of Divine praise.'

After the consecration of the first chapel, the desires of the Brethren were stirred up for nearly three years to the building of a monastery ; and in the accomplishing of this the senior Brethren with their Rector were chiefly occupied, and hastened all necessary requirements for prosecuting and finishing the work. For they felt that without monastic discipline, according to an obligatory rule, it would be impossible to preserve the standing of the House. Moreover they exercised some foresight and skill for themselves and their posterity in building a wall around the grounds, so that the simple and humble life of the Brethren might be preserved from being disquieted by the craft of worldly men, when it should be found that they had taken refuge in a religious life. It must be admitted that they were poor men, and had not the necessary means for building, or procuring books for singing ; yet trusting to the goodness of God, and being animated by the assistance of good men, they were enabled eventually to proceed in the sacred work they had begun. And when a certain person said that he wondered that men so poor should be desirous of building a monastery, and entering a state of religion from which they could not return, Father John de Ummen, ever a lover of holy poverty, replied, 'I have always heard it said by the saints that poverty is good, and the cause and increase moreover of all that is good.'<sup>1</sup>

All things, however, as we shall hereafter find, did not run smoothly with the Brethren : their design was much opposed ; difficulties were thrown in the way of their carrying on the undertaking, and it was not without the exhibition of much animosity from worldly people that the Brethren made a humble beginning of the monastery where à Kempis lived so many days. They were content to make a start, though with some misgivings, which afterwards

<sup>1</sup> *Chron. Mt. St. Agnes*, chap. v.

appeared to be too well grounded, and the work went on, till it was sufficiently advanced to commence the conventional life in it on a small scale. But let us tell the story as we gather it from the words of Thomas à Kempis in another chapter.



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